



# The Loire Valley

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## Best Places to Stay

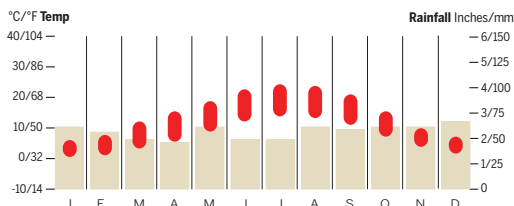
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## Why Go?

In centuries past, the River Loire was a key strategic area, one step removed from the French capital and poised on the crucial frontier between northern and southern France. Kings, queens, dukes and nobles established their feudal strongholds and country seats along the Loire, and the broad, flat valley is sprinkled with many of the most extravagant castles and fortresses in France. From sky-topping turrets and glittering banquet halls to slate-crowned cupolas and crenellated towers, the hundreds of châteaux dotted around the Loire Valley – now a Unesco World Heritage Site – comprise 1000 years of astonishingly rich architectural and artistic treasures. If it's aristocratic pomp and architectural splendour you're looking for, the Loire Valley is the place to explore.

## When to Go

### Tours



**Late April to early May** The Fêtes de Jeanne d'Arc in Orléans culminate with parades on 8 May.

**June and July** Cycle the trails of the Loire Valley from château to château.

**September and October** Wine tasting during the harvest time.

## PLAN AHEAD

Before you go, plan your transport, reserve rooms in hot spots like Saumur, Amboise or Chinon and book castle tours (opposite) or the Cadre Noir equestrian presentation (p379).

## The Loire's Best Gardens

- » Le Clos Lucé (p373)
- » Chambord (p361)
- » Villandry (p374)
- » Cheverny (p362)
- » Chenonceau (p369)
- » Chaumont (p363)
- » Beaugerard (p364)

## Spring Music Festival

Every Easter over 100,000 music fans converge on Bourges to take in the latest in innovative rock, roots and French music at **Le Printemps de Bourges** ([www.printemps-bourges.com](http://www.printemps-bourges.com)).

## Resources

- » Loire Valley heritage site: [www.valde Loire.org](http://www.valde Loire.org)
- » Walks and cycling routes in the Loire Valley: [www.randonnee-en-val-de-loire.com](http://www.randonnee-en-val-de-loire.com)
- » The natural environment of the River Loire: [www.observatoireloire.fr](http://www.observatoireloire.fr), [www.cpie-val-de-loire.org](http://www.cpie-val-de-loire.org), in French
- » Regional transport details: [www.destineeo.fr](http://www.destineeo.fr)

## Wine in the Loire Valley

Vineyards ([www.vinsdeloire.com](http://www.vinsdeloire.com)) dot the fertile Loire Valley and produce some excellent, but relatively little-known red, white and *crémant* (sparkling) wines. Anjou and Saumur alone have 30 AOCs (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée), and Touraine has nine, including some lively gamays. The most predominant red, though, is the cabernet franc.

Appellations include Saumur-Champigny (try Domaine Clos Rougeard), Bourgueil (try Domaine de la Butte) and Chinon (try the Cuvée des Tireaux from Domaine Olek-Mery).

For whites, Vouvray's chenin blancs are excellent and Sancerre and the appellation across the river, Pouilly-Fumé, produce great sauvignon blancs. The bubbly appellation Crémant de Loire spans many communities.

Maisons des Vins (literally, wine houses) in Blois, Saumur, Cheverny and Angers welcome visitors for tasting and guidance on the region's wine. The Route Touristique des Vignobles is a Loire Valley wine route; before you set out, stop by a tourist office and arm yourself with the *Loire Valley Vineyards* booklet, which lists and maps all the domaines, and *Sur La Route des Vins de Loire*, which maps from Blois to Angers and the coast.

## ON THE TRAIL OF ARTISTS & WRITERS

While the fantastical history and high jinks of French royalty gets top billing in the Loire, the valley has also played host to a stream of Europe's greatest artists and thinkers. Mathematician and philosopher René Descartes, poet Pierre de Ronsard and writer and doctor François Rabelais (p378) were all born in the Loire; Leonardo da Vinci (see p373) spent the last years of his life here; and luminaries from sculptor Alexander Calder to novelist Honoré de Balzac (p376) lived and created in this region. Some, like Jean Gênet, were imprisoned here (p383). Then there were those, like Alexandre Dumas (see p383), who were simply inspired here.

## Top 5 Activities for Kids

- » Be dazzle-dazzled by magic and illusion at Maison de la Magie (p359).
- » Explore kooky, spooky caves around Saumur (p382).
- » Celebrate comic book character Tintin with cracks of lightning and pounding thunder (p362).
- » Peer into itsy-bitsy châteaux or play in the parks around a pointy pagoda (p373).
- » Hunt for treasure at Château de Montsoreau (p383).

## History

The dramas of French history are writ large across the face of the Loire Valley's châteaux. Early on, the Loire was one of Roman Gaul's most important transport arteries and the earliest châteaux were medieval fortresses established in the 9th century to fend off marauding Vikings. By the 11th century massive walls, fortified keeps and moats were all the rage.

During the Hundred Years War (1337–1453) the Loire marked the boundary between French and English forces and the area was ravaged by fierce fighting. After Charles VII regained his crown with the help of Joan of Arc, the Loire emerged as the centre of French court life. Charles took up residence in Loches with his mistress, Agnes Sorèl, and the French nobility and bourgeois elite established their own extravagant châteaux as an expression of wealth and power.

François I (r 1515–47) made his mark by introducing ornate Renaissance palaces to the Loire. François' successor Henri II (r 1547–59), his wife Catherine de Médicis and his mistress Diane de Poitiers played out their interpersonal dramas from castle to castle. While Henri's son, Henri III (r 1573–89) used Blois' castle to assassinate two of his greatest rivals before being assassinated himself eight months later.

## Getting There & Away

**AIR** Tours' airport has Ryanair connections to London Stansted, Dublin, Marseille and Porto, and flights to other French cities.

**TRAIN** The TGV Atlantique connects St-Pierre-des-Corps, near Tours, with Paris' Gare Montparnasse and Charles de Gaulle Airport in around an hour. The Loire's other cities (including Orléans, Blois, Amboise and Angers) are served by high-speed trains to Paris.

## Getting Around

Most main towns and many châteaux are accessible by train or bus, but if you're working to a timetable, having your own wheels allows significantly more freedom.

**BICYCLE** The Loire Valley is mostly flat, which makes for excellent cycling country. The **Loire à Vélo** ([www.loireavelo.fr](http://www.loireavelo.fr)) scheme maintains a total of 800km of signposted routes from Cuffly near Nevers all the way to the Atlantic. Pick up a free guide from tourist offices, or download material (including route maps, audioguides and bike-hire details) from the website.

**Détours de Loire** (02 47 61 22 23; [www.locationdevelos.com](http://www.locationdevelos.com)) has bike-rental shops in

Tours, Blois and Saumur and myriad partners; can deliver bikes; and allows you to pick up and drop off bikes along the route for a small surcharge. Prices include a lock, helmet, repair kit and pump. Classic bikes cost €14 per day; weekly hire costs €59 with extra days at €5. Tandems are €45 per day.

**Les Châteaux à Vélo** (02 54 78 62 52; [www.chateauxavelo.com](http://www.chateauxavelo.com); per day €12–14) has a bike rental circuit between Blois, Chambord and Cheverny, 300km of marked trails and can shuttle you by minibus. Get free route maps from the website or tourist offices (also 40 downloadable MP3 guides).

**TOURS** Hard-core indie travellers might balk at the idea of a minibus tour of the châteaux, but don't dismiss it out of hand, especially if you don't have your own wheels.

The Blois tourist office and **TLC** (02 54 58 55 44; [www.tlcinfo.net](http://www.tlcinfo.net), in French) offer a shuttle (€6) from Blois to Chambord and Cheverny, three times per morning from April to August.

Most companies (listed below) offer a choice of well-organised itineraries, taking in various combinations of Azay-le-Rideau, Villandry, Cheverny, Chambord and Chenonceau (plus wine-tasting tours). Half-day trips cost between €18 and €33; full-day trips range from €43 to €50. Entry to the châteaux isn't included, although you'll get a discount on tickets. Reserve via the tourist office in Tours, from where most tours depart.

**Acco-Dispo** (06 82 00 64 51; [www.acco-dispo-tours.com](http://www.acco-dispo-tours.com))

**Alienor** (06 10 85 35 39; [www.alienor.com](http://www.alienor.com))

**Loire Valley Tours** (02 54 33 99 80; [www.loire-valley-tours.com](http://www.loire-valley-tours.com)) Tours including château admission (€125).

**Luxury Tours** (06 66 64 20 08; [www.luxurytours.fr](http://www.luxurytours.fr)) Private town cars (€105 to €256).

**Quart de Tours** (06 30 65 52 01; [www.quartdetours.com](http://www.quartdetours.com))

**St-Eloi Excursions** (02 47 37 08 04; [www.saint-eloi.com](http://www.saint-eloi.com))

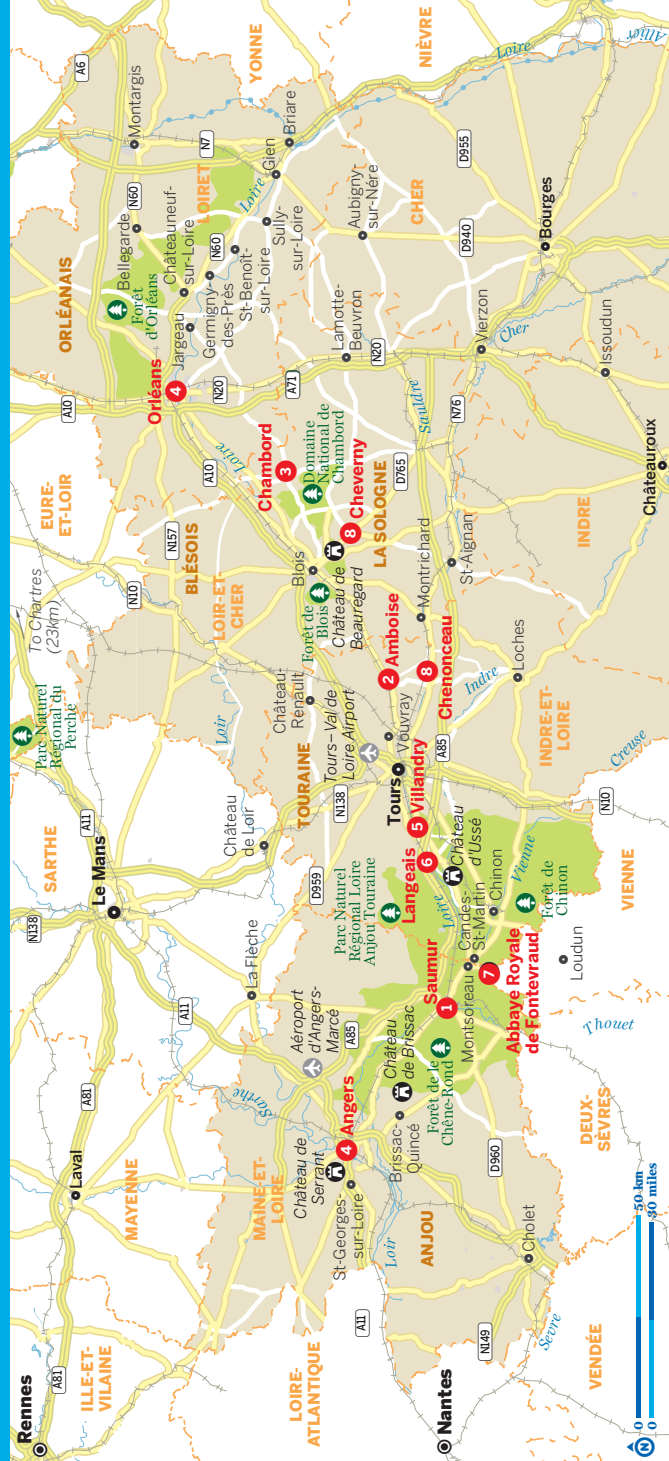
**Touraine Evasion** (06 07 39 13 31; [www.tourevasion.com](http://www.tourevasion.com))

## ORLÉANAIS

Taking its name from the historic city of Orléans, famous for its Joan of Arc connections, the Orléanais is the northern gateway to the Loire Valley. In the east are the ecclesiastical treasures of St-Benoît-sur-Loire and Germigny-des-Prés, while to the south lies the marshy Sologne, historically a favourite hunting ground for France's kings and princes.

## The Loire Valley Highlights

- 1** Combine fantastic food, wines and caving with a bit of equestrian history in **Saumur** (p379)
- 2** Explore the invention-filled final home of Leonardo da Vinci, at **Clos Lucé** (p373)
- 3** Climb to the turret-covered rooftop of **Chambord** (p361), the Loire Valley's most over-the-top château
- 4** Sample the Loire Valley's bustling city life in **Tours** (p364), **Angers** (p384) or **Orléans** (p353) for café culture and excellent museums
- 5** Admire the meticulous gardens and floral displays of **Villandry** (p374)
- 6** Wander back in time at medieval château **Langeais** (p375)
- 7** Explore the Loire Valley's greatest ecclesiastical complex, **Abbaye Royale de Fontevraud** (p383)
- 8** Peruse art at **Cheverny** (p362) and **Chenonceau** (p369)



## Orléans

POP 116,490

There's a definite big-city buzz around the boulevards, flashy boutiques and elegant buildings of Orléans, 100km south of Paris. It's a city with enduring heritage: already an important settlement by the time of the Romans' arrival, Orléans sealed its place in history in 1429 when a young peasant girl by the name of Jeanne d'Arc (Joan of Arc) rallied the armies of Charles VII and staged a spectacular rout against the besieging English forces, a key turning point in the Hundred Years War. Seven centuries later, the Maid of Orléans still exerts a powerful hold on the French imagination, and you'll discover statues, plaques and museums dedicated to her around town. The city's charming, mostly pedestrianised medieval quarter stretches from the River Loire north to rue Jeanne d'Arc and has an outstanding art museum and fantastical cathedral.



### Sights & Activities

The tourist office runs guided **walking tours** (generally in French, but some-

times in English) of Orléans' sights in July and August, and occasionally the rest of the year. Some are combined with a riverboat cruise. The office also sells self-guided walking tour brochures: *Circuit Découverte* (€2) and *9 Balades Entre Ciel et Loire* (€1).



**Musée des Beaux-Arts** ART MUSEUM (☎02 38 79 2155; 1 rue Fernand Rabier; adult/child incl audio guide €4/2.50; ☀10am-6pm Tue-Sun) Orléans' five-storeyed fine-arts museum is a treat, with an excellent selection of Italian, Flemish and Dutch paintings (including works by Correggio, Velázquez and Bruegel), as well as a huge collection by French artists such as Léon Cogniet (1794-1880) and Orléans-born Alexandre Antigna (1817-78). Among the treasures are an exceedingly rare set of **18th-century pastels** by Maurice Quentin de la Tour and Jean-Baptiste Chardin, and Claude Dervet's *Les Quatre Éléments* (mid-1600s) illustrating air, fire, earth and (frozen) water. The museum's galleries themselves are enormous and spectacular. Free the first Sunday of each month.

## CHOOSING YOUR CHÂTEAU

There's no doubt that for dramatic castles, the Loire Valley is definitely the place, but with so many glorious palaces to choose from, how on earth do you go about selecting which one to visit? Here's our whistle-stop guide to help you decide.

For sheer, unadulterated architectural splendour, you can't top the big three: François I's country getaway **Chambord**, Renaissance river-spanning **Chenonceau** and the supremely graceful **Cheverny**. Unsurprisingly, these are also far and away the three most visited châteaux; turn up early or late to dodge the hordes.

If it's the medieval, Monty Python and the Holy Grail kind of castle you're after, head for the imposing fortress of **Langeais**, complete with its original furnishings, battlements and drawbridge; the cylindrical towers of **Chaumont**, once owned by Catherine de Médicis; or the walled stronghold of **Loches**.

For historical significance, top of the list are the royal residences of **Blois**, spanning four distinct periods of French history; stately **Amboise**, home to a succession of French monarchs including Charles VIII and Louis XI; black-stoned **Angers** with its fantastic tapestry; and pastoral **Clos Lucé** in Amboise, where Leonardo da Vinci whiled away his final years.

For literary connections, try the inspiration for *Sleeping Beauty*, **Ussé**; Balzac's residence, **Saché** (see p376); or **Montsoreau**, the setting for a classic Alexandre Dumas novel.

Looking for the picture-perfect setting? Our choices are the moat-ringed **Azay-le-Rideau**, the formal gardens of **Villandry** and the little-visited château of **Beauregard**, famous for its astonishing portrait gallery of medieval celebrities and its peaceful grounds.

And lastly, if you're looking for solitude, visit any of the châteaux we haven't listed here; the chances are the lesser-known places will be much quieter than their bigger, better-known and better-looking cousins elsewhere in the valley.

## Cathédrale Ste-Croix

CATHEDRAL

(place Ste-Croix; ☉9.15am-noon & 2.15-5.45pm)  
In a country of jaw-dropping churches, the Cathédrale Ste-Croix still raises a gasp. Towering above place Ste-Croix, Orléans' Flamboyant Gothic cathedral was originally built in the 13th century and then underwent collective tinkering by successive monarchs, including Henri IV, who started reconstruction in 1601, Louis XIII (r 1610-43) who restored the choir and nave, Louis XIV (r 1643-1715) responsible for the transept, and Louis XV (r 1715-74) and Louis XVI (r 1774-92), who rebuilt the western facade, including its huge arches and wedding-cake towers. Inside, slender columns soar skywards towards the vaulted ceiling and 106m spire, completed in 1895, while a series of vividly coloured stained-glass windows relate the life of St Joan, who was canonised in 1920. Joan came here on 8 May 1429 and was greeted with a procession of thanks for saving the town.

**FREE** Hôtel Grosloot

## HISTORIC MANSION

**FREE** (☎02 38 79 22 30; place de l'Étape; ☺9am-moon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri, 5-7pm Sat, 10am-6pm Sun) Opposite the fine arts museum, the Renaissance Hôtel Grosloot was built in the 15th century as a private mansion for Jacques Grosloot, a city bailiff, and later used as Orléans' town hall during the Revolution. The neomedieval interior is extravagant, especially the ornate bedroom in which the 17-year-old King François II died in 1560 (now used as a marriage hall). The gardens at the rear are lovely.

## Maison de Jeanne d'Arc

HISTORY MUSEUM

(☎02 38 52 99 89; [www.jeannedarc.com.fr](http://www.jeannedarc.com.fr), in French; 3 place du Général de Gaulle; adult/child €2/1; ☼10am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sun) This reconstruction of a 15th-century house that hosted the Maid between April and May 1429 (the original was destroyed by British bombing in 1940, something the locals politely avoid mentioning) displays manuscripts, flags and vintage swords.

## Orléans





plus a scale model recreating the siege of Orléans.

### Musée Historique et Archéologique

ARCHAEOLOGY MUSEUM

(☎02 38 79 25 60; sq Abbé Desnoyers; ☀10am-6pm Tue-Sun) A ticket to Musée des Beaux-Arts also grants entry to this museum, worth visiting for several imaginative representations of the Maid of Orléans, as well as Gallo-Roman sculptures unearthed nearby.

### Place du Martroi

CITY SQUARE

Three of Orléans' main boulevards (rue Bannier, rue de la République and rue Royale) converge on place du Martroi, where you'll find a huge bronze **statue** (1855) by Denis Foyatier, the city's most stirring representation of St Joan atop a prancing steed.



### Festivals & Events

Since 1430 the Orléanais have celebrated the annual **Fêtes de Jeanne d'Arc** (www.fetesjeannedarc.com, in French) in late April and early May, commemorating the liberation of the city from the occupying English. A week of street parties, enormous medieval costume parades and concerts ends with a solemn morning Mass at the cathedral on 8 May.



### Sleeping



#### Hôtel de l'Abeille

HISTORIC HOTEL €€

(☎02 38 53 54 87; www.hoteldelabeille.com; 64 rue Alsace-Lorraine; s €47, d €64-89, 5 people €120; 🍷🍷) Bees buzz, floorboards creak and vintage Orléans posters adorn the walls at this gorgeous turn-of-the-century house. It's deliciously old-fashioned, from the scuffed pine floors and wildly floral wall-

papers to the hefty dressers and bee-print curtains. For breakfast (€9) there's a choice of coffees, teas, pâtisserie and exotic jams.

### Hôtel Archange

BOUTIQUE HOTEL €

(☎02 38 54 42 42; www.hotelarchange.com; 1 bd de Verdun; d €47-57) Gilded mirrors, cherub murals and sofas shaped like giant hands greet you at this station hotel aiming for boutique status. Citrus colour schemes spice up some rooms. Shuttered windows combat daytime tram noise. The hotel is located just around the corner from rue de la République and across from the Centre Commercial Place d'Arc.

### Hôtel d'Arc

HOTEL €€

(☎02 38 53 10 94; www.hoteldarc.fr; 37 ter rue de la République; s €90-132, d €104-171; 🍷🍷🍷) Ride the vintage-style lift to swank guest-rooms. Rooms vary in size and the Prestige and Deluxe come with plush robes, but all are done up comfortably. Double-glazed windows help with daytime tram noise.

### Jackôtel

HOTEL €

(☎02 38 54 48 48; www.jackotel.com; 18 Cloître St-Aignan; d €50-70; 🍷) Simple little place tucked in a modernised cloister shaded by chestnut trees. Floral patterns and catalogue furniture fill basic rooms. It's whisper-quiet and has free parking.

### Hôtel Marguerite

HOTEL €

(☎02 38 53 74 32; www.hotel-orleans.fr; 14 place du Vieux Marché; s €55-66, d €64-75; 🍷) Solid, basic and worth recommending for its central location and wallet-friendly prices. Expect floral-print bedrooms and bright colours; opt for a superior room if you like your bathroom sparkling and your shower powerful.

## Orléans

### 📍 Top Sights

|                           |    |
|---------------------------|----|
| Cathédrale Ste-Croix..... | D2 |
| Hôtel Grosloir.....       | C1 |
| Musée des Beaux-Arts..... | C2 |

### 📍 Sights

|   |    |
|---|----|
| 1 Joan of Arc Statue.....                   | A2 |
| 2 Maison de Jeanne d'Arc.....               | A2 |
| 3 Musée Historique et<br>Archéologique..... | B2 |

### 📍 Sleeping

|                         |    |
|-------------------------|----|
| 4 Hôtel Marguerite..... | A3 |
|-------------------------|----|

### 🍷 Eating

|                                  |    |
|----------------------------------|----|
| 5 Au Bon Marché.....             | B3 |
| 6 Chez Noé.....                  | D3 |
| 7 Covered Market.....            | B3 |
| 8 Jin.....                       | B3 |
| 9 Le Brin de Zinc.....           | B2 |
| 10 Le Dariole.....               | C2 |
| 11 Petit Casino Supermarket..... | B2 |

### 🍷 Drinking

|                       |    |
|-----------------------|----|
| 12 L'Atelier.....     | C3 |
| 13 O Lodge.....       | B2 |
| 14 Paxton's Head..... | C3 |

**Auberge de Jeunesse CRJS Orléans**

HOSTEL €

(☎02 38 53 60 06; [www.creps-crjs-centre.fr](http://www.creps-crjs-centre.fr), in French; 7 av de Beaumarchais, La Source; dm with member's card under 26yr/over 26yr €10.70/15.25; ☎reception 8am-7pm Mon-Fri) For those on a shoestring budget, this is a bare-bones hostel at the Stade Omnisports (sports stadium), 10km south of Orléans in La Source. Sixty beds in spartan rooms have cardboard mattresses. Phone ahead weekends. Jump off the tram or bus 20 at Université L'Indien.

**Eating****Chez Noé**

BRASSERIE €€

(☎02 38 53 44 09; 195 rue de Bourgogne; lunch menus €12, dinner menus €21-32; ☎lunch Tue-Fri, dinner Tue-Sat) Characterful – think hardwood floors, checked tablecloths and Louis Prima on the stereo – cheery and crammed at lunchtime and on weekends, this lively brasserie is about uncomplicated food at fair prices, from garlic snails to salmon steak.

**Au Bon Marché**

TRADITIONAL FRENCH €€

(☎02 38 53 04 35; 12 place du Chatelet; lunch menus €7.50-10, dinner menus €14-27; 🍷) An old-time bar for many years, elegant wooden banquets and panelling remain. The bright, welcoming dining room fills up with local families out for a nice meal: the kids' menu (€8) is free with an adult menu Sunday to Wednesday. Dig into imaginatively presented dishes like rosemary duck on a brochette. Reserve ahead.

**Le Brin de Zinc**

BISTRO €€

(☎02 38 53 38 77; 62 Rue St-Catherine; lunch menus €16, dinner menus €22-27) Battered signs, old telephones and even a vintage scooter decorate this old-world bistro, serving up lashings of mussels and oysters at lunchtime and platters of rich bistro food till late. The daily blackboard *plat du jour* at €7.80 is an excellent value.

**Jim**

JAPANESE €€

(☎02 38 53 80 95; 13 rue Louis Roguet; lunch menus €12, mains €12.50-18) Zingy Japanese restaurant serving authentic sushi, *yakitori* and *maki* in a metro setting, all mauve bucket seats, scarlet lanterns and shiny chrome, with a sunny terrace.

**Le Dariole**

TEA HOUSE €€

(☎02 38 77 26 67; 25 rue Étienne Dolet; menus €17.50-22; ☎lunch Mon-Fri, dinner Tue-Fri, salon de thé 2.30-7pm Mon-Sat) This rustic

*salon de thé* carries loads of teas from rare Jasmine to Georgian and Chinese Dragon, as well as homemade cakes and pâtisserie. After nightfall it transforms into a smart restaurant specialising in regional food.

**Self-Catering****Covered Market**

FOOD MARKET €

(place du Châtelet; ☎7.30am-7.30pm Tue-Sat, 8am-1pm Sun) Inside the Halles de Châtelet shopping centre.

**Carrefour**

SUPERMARKET €

(Centre Commercial Place d'Arc; ☎8.30am-9pm Mon-Sat)

**Petit Casino**

SUPERMARKET €

(15 rue Jeanne d'Arc; ☎9am-7pm Mon-Sat)

**Drinking & Entertainment**

The free *Orléans Poche* ([www.orleanspoche.com](http://www.orleanspoche.com), in French) details cultural hot spots and happenings. Rue de Bourgogne and rue du Poirier are chock-a-block with drinking holes.

**Bistrot le Bas Bleu**

LITERARY CAFÉ

(☎02 38 21 69 24; [www.lebasbleu.com](http://www.lebasbleu.com); 164 rue de Bourgogne; ☎3pm-1am Tue-Sat) Lined with wooden tables and original art, this intimate bistro fills up for readings and open mics (Tuesdays from 8pm, with a free drink for speakers!).

**L'Atelier**

JAZZ BAR

(☎06 83 02 11 77; [www.latelier203.com](http://www.latelier203.com); 203 rue de Bourgogne; ☎5.30pm-2am Mon-Sat, 5-10pm Sun) Chilled out bar that hosts jazz and other concerts.

**O Lodge**

MUSIC BAR

(☎02 38 77 70 15; place de la République; ☎11am-midnight Mon-Thu, to 1am Fri & Sat) Bands and DJs provide the tunes while you tuck into burgers, cocktails and beers.

**Paxton's Head**

PUB

(☎02 38 81 23 29; 264-266 rue de Bourgogne; ☎3pm-3am Tue-Sat) Traditional Brit-style pub with a murky cellar-bar that hosts jazz combos and bands on weekends.

**Information**

**Call Shop** (194 rue de Bourgogne; per 15min €1; ☎10.30am-8pm Mon-Sat, 5-8pm Sun) Internet access.

**Exagames** (5 rue Parisie; per hr €5; ☎2-7pm Sun-Tue, 11am-7pm Wed-Thu, 11am-10pm Fri, 2-10pm Sat) Internet access.



**Main post office** (place du Général de Gaulle)  
Currency exchange and internet access.

**Tourist office** (☎02 38 24 05 05; www.tourisme-orleans.com; 2 place de l'Étape;  
☉9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat)

## **i** Getting There & Away

**BUS Ulys** (www.ulyss-loiret.com, in French) brings together information for local bus companies serving the Orléanais area. Buy tickets (€2) on board or at the **bus station** (☎02 38 53 94 75; 2 rue Marcel Proust).

**Sully-sur-Loire** Line 7 via Jargeau, 1¼ hours, three daily Monday to Friday, one Saturday and Sunday

**Châteauneuf-sur-Loire** Line 3, 40 minutes, five daily Monday to Saturday, two on Sunday

**TRAIN** The city's two stations, Gare d'Orléans and Gare des Aubrais-Orléans (the latter is 2km to the north), are linked by tram and frequent shuttle trains. Trains usually stop at both stations.

**Blois** €13 to €20, 45 minutes, hourly

**Paris Gare d'Austerlitz** €24 to €37, 70 minutes, hourly

**Tours** €24 to €35, one to 1½ hours, hourly

## **i** Getting Around

**Espace Transport** (☎08 00 01 20 00; www.semtao.fr, in French; Gare d'Orléans; ☉6.45am-7.15pm Mon-Fri, 8am-6.30pm Sat) Information and tickets (single/10-ticket **carnet** €1.40/12.30). Trams run until around 12.30am, buses till 8pm or 9pm.

**Vélo+** (☎08 00 00 83 56; www.agglo-veloplus.fr, in French; deposit with credit card €3, first 30min free, next 30min €0.50, per subsequent hr €2) On-street bike-hire system, with stations all over town (eg train station, cathedral).

## Orléans to Sully-sur-Loire

The 350-sq-km Forêt d'Orléans (one of the few remaining places in France where you can spot wild ospreys) stretches north of Orléans, while east of Orléans lie intriguing churches and little-known châteaux.

Châteauneuf-sur-Loire's **Musée de la Marine de Loire** (☎02 38 46 84 46; 1 place Aristide Briand; adult/child €3.50/2; ☉10am-6pm Wed-Mon) explores the history of river ship-ping on the Loire, with a collection of model boats and riverine artefacts displayed in the former stables of the town's **château**.



**Oratoire de Germigny-des-Prés** (806), another 6km southeast, is one of France's few Carolingian churches,

renowned for its unusual Maltese-cross layout and gilt-and-silver 9th-century mosaic of the Ark of the Covenant.

Twelve kilometres further southeast, St-Benoît-sur-Loire's Romanesque **Abbaye de Fleury** (☎02 38 35 72 43; www.abbaye-fleury.com; ☉6.30am-10pm) is still home to a practising Benedictine brotherhood, who conduct summertime tours. Look out for the basilica's famous decorated portal and capitals and the relics of St Benedict (480-547) which the monks fetched from Montecassino, Italy in 672.

Nine kilometres southeast of St-Benoît, the **Château de Sully-sur-Loire** (☎02 38 36 36 86; adult/child €6/3; ☉10am-6pm Tue-Sun, closed noon-2pm Oct-Mar) is a grand example of a fairy-tale castle, with machicolated ramparts and turrets rising from a glassy moat. Built from 1395 to defend one of the Loire's crucial crossings, Louis XIV took refuge here with Anne of Austria. The castle underwent major refurbishment in 2007-08 and has an impressive exposed vaulted roof and historic **tapestries** depicting the story of Psyche. An outdoor **music festival** (www.festival-sully.com, in French) jams in late May and early June.

## La Sologne

For centuries, the boggy wetland and murky woods of La Sologne have been one of France's great hunting grounds, with deer, boars, pheasants and stags roaming the woodland, and eels, carp and pike filling its deep ponds and rivers. François I established it as a royal playground, but years of war and floods turned it into malaria-infested swamp; only in the mid-19th century, after it was drained under Napoléon III, did La Sologne regain its hunting prestige.

In winter it can be a desolate place, with drizzle and thick fog blanketing the landscape, but in summer it's a riot of wildflowers and makes for great country to explore on foot, bike or horseback. Paths and trails criss-cross the area, including the GR31 and the GR3C, but stick to the signposted routes during hunting season to avoid getting buckshot in your backside.

For info on hikes and walks in the Sologne, contact the **tourist office** (☎02 54 76 43 89; www.tourisme-romorantin.com, in French; ☉9.45am-12.15pm & 1.30-6pm Mon-Sat, also Sun afternoon July & Aug) in Romorantin-Lanthenay, 41km southeast of Blois. Some

trails leave from near Saint-Viâtre's **Maison des Étangs** (☎02 54 88 23 00; www.maison-des-etangs.com; 2 rue de la Poste; adult/child €5/2.50; ☀10am-noon & 2-6pm), a museum exploring La Sologne's 2800 *étangs* (ponds).

On the last weekend in October the annual **Journées Gastronomiques de Sologne** fills the streets of Romorantin with local delicacies like stuffed trout, wild-boar pâté and freshly baked *tarte tatin*, the upside-down apple tart accidentally created in 1888 by two sisters in nearby Lamotte-Beuvron.

Trains run from Romorantin-Lanthenay to Tours (via Gièvres; €19, 1½ hours, six daily). Buses go to Blois (€2, one to four daily).

## BLÉSOIS

The countryside around the former royal seat of Blois is surrounded by some of the country's finest châteaux, including graceful Cheverny, little-visited Beaugard and the turret-topped supertanker château to end them all, Chambord.

### Blois

POP 40,057

Looming on a rocky escarpment on the northern bank of the Loire, Blois' historic château (formerly the feudal seat of the powerful counts of Blois) provides a whistle-stop tour through the key periods of French history and architecture. Blois suffered heavy bombardment during WWII, and the modern-day town is mostly the result of postwar reconstruction. The twisting streets of the old town give some idea of how Blois might have looked to its medieval inhabitants.

## Sights & Activities

For château tours and bicycling see p357.

### Château Royal de Blois

CASTLE

(☎02 54 90 33 32; www.chateaublois.fr; place du Château; adult/child €8/4; ☀9am-6.30pm) Blois' château and the former royal seat was intended more as an architectural show-piece than a military stronghold, and successive French kings have left their creative mark over the centuries. From the château's huge **central courtyard** you can view four distinct periods of French architecture: the Gothic Salle des États and original medieval castle; François I's Renaissance north wing (1515–24); the classical west wing (1635–38) constructed under Gaston d'Orléans, brother to Louis XIII; and Louis XII's red-brick Flamboyant Gothic east wing (1498–1503).

The impressive **Salle des États Généraux** (Estates General Hall, c 1220) has a soaring double barrel-vaulted roof decorated in royal blues and golden fleurs-de-lis. Blois' medieval lords meted out justice here in the Middle Ages, and Luc Besson used it for the dramatic trial scene in his 1999 biopic *Jeanne d'Arc*.

The most famous feature of the Renaissance wing, the royal apartments of François I and Queen Claude, is the **loggia staircase**, decorated with salamanders and curly 'F's (heraldic symbols of François I). Highlights include the bedchamber in which Catherine de Médicis (Henri II's machiavellian wife) died in 1589. According to Alexandre Dumas, the queen stashed her poisons in secret cupboards behind the elaborately panelled walls of the **studiolo**, one of the few rooms in the castle with its original decor.

The 2nd-floor **king's apartments** were the setting for one of the bloodiest episodes



### LE PASS' CHÂTEAUX

Many of the châteaux in the Blésois are covered by the **Pass' Châteaux**, which offers savings of between €1.20 and €5.30 depending on which châteaux you visit; contact the tourist offices in Blois, Cheverny and Chambord. Additional formulas include smaller châteaux at Villesavin, Troussay and Talcy.

- » Blois–Chambord–Cheverny €20.50
- » Blois–Chenonceau–Cheverny–Chambord €30.50
- » Chambord–Cheverny–Beaugard €21
- » Blois–Chambord–Chaumont €22
- » Blois–Chambord–Cheverny–Beaugard €28.50
- » Blois–Cheverny–Chaumont–Chambord €28.50

in the château's history: in 1588 Henri III had his arch-rival, Duke Henri I de Guise, murdered by royal bodyguards (the king hid behind a tapestry). He had the Duke's brother, the Cardinal de Guise, killed the next day. Henri III was himself murdered just eight months later by a vengeful monk. Period paintings chronicle the gruesome events.

The brick-and-stone Louis XII wing houses the **Musée des Beaux-Arts**, where the most popular work is a portrait of an alarmingly hairy girl (apparently the result of a rare genetic disease) by the Italian painter Lavinia Fontana.

The château hosts a 45-minute **son et lumière** (☎02 54 55 26 31; adult/child €7/4; ☉mid-Apr–late Sep) featuring huge projections on the walls (English version Wednesday).

### Maison de la Magie

MAGIC MUSEUM

(House of Magic; ☎02 54 90 33 33; www.maison.delamagie.fr, in French; 1 place du Château; adult/child €9/5; ☉10am–12.30pm & 2–6.30pm, closed mornings Mon–Fri Sep) Opposite the château you can't miss the former home of watchmaker, inventor and conjurer Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin (1805–71) when, on the hour, dragons emerge roaring from the windows. It has entertaining live magic shows (three to four daily), exhibits on the history of magic and loads of optical trickery including a mysterious 'Hallucinoscope'. It's goofy, good fun! The great Harry Houdini named himself after Houdin, and there is a short historical film about the American magician.

### Musée de l'Objet

ART MUSEUM

(☎02 54 55 37 45; www.museedelobjet.org, in French; 6 rue Franciade; adult/child €4/2; ☉1.30–6.30pm Fri–Sun, closed Dec–Feb) This brilliant modern arts museum is based on the collection of the artist Eric Fabre, and concentrates on artworks made using everyday materials. Among the best pieces are a sculpture of coat-hangers by Man Ray, an *objet scatologique* (involving a large high-heeled shoe) by Salvador Dalí and a *TV Buddha* by Nam June Paik.

### Old City

HISTORIC QUARTER

Despite serious damage by German attacks in 1940, Blois' old city is worth exploring, especially around the 17th-century **Cathédrale St-Louis** (place St-Louis; ☉9am–6pm), with its lovely multistoreyed bell tower, dramatically floodlit after dark. Most of the



## COMBO TICKETS

If you're taking in the château, the *son et lumière* and the Maison de la Magie, combination tickets save a bit of cash. Kids under six are free.

- » Château & Son et Lumière (adult/child €13/6)
- » Château & Maison de la Magie (adult/child €14/6.50)
- » All three (adult/child €18/10)

stained glass inside was installed by Dutch artist Jan Dibbets in 2000.

Across the square, the facade of **Maison des Acrobates** (3bis rue Pierre de Blois) is decorated with wooden sculptures taken from medieval farces, and one of the few 15th-century houses to survive. There's another example at No 13 called **Hôtel de Villebrême**.

Lovely panoramas unfold across town from the peaceful **Jardins de l'Évêché** and the top of the **Escalier Denis Papin**.

### Tours of Blois

CITY TOURS

The tourist office offers English-language walking tour brochures and guided tours in French. Better yet, château guides run 1½-hour historically oriented city tours (adult/child €5/3), also in French.

Horse-drawn **carriage rides** (adult/child €6/4; ☉2–6pm) clop around town from the château's main gate. Book at the tourist office, or wait outside the château for the next carriage.



### Sleeping

#### Côté Loire

HOTEL €

(☎02 54 78 07 86; www.coteloire.com; 2 place de la Grève; d €55–76; ☉) If it's charm and colours you want, head for the centrally located Loire Coast, with rooms decked out in cheery checks, bright pastels and the odd bit of exposed brick. There's a wooden-decked breakfast patio and bustling restaurant (lunch/dinner *menus* €18/28).

#### Hôtel Anne de Bretagne

HOTEL €

(☎02 54 78 05 38; http://annedebretagne.free.fr; 31 av du Dr Jean Laigret; s €45–51, d €54–56, tr €60–72; ☉☎) This creeper-covered hotel has friendly staff and a bar full of polished wood and vintage pictures. Modern rooms are finished in flowery wallpaper and stripy bedspreads; some adjoin for families.

**Le Monarque**

(02 54 78 02 35; <http://annedebretagne.free.fr>; 61 rue Porte Chartraine; s €38, d €58-59; ☹☹) Modern, bright and no-nonsense, this hotel sits at the edge of the old city, and offers comfort, cleanliness and a restaurant (*menus* €18 to €28). Parking by reservation (€3).

HOTEL €

**Hôtel Le Savoie**

(02 54 74 32 21; [www.hotel-blois.com](http://www.hotel-blois.com), in French; 6 rue Ducoux; s/d/tr €48/55/79; ☹) Handy for train travellers, straightforward, modern chain-style rooms are cheered up by bright fabrics. Free bike parking.

HOTEL €

**RV Parking**

Contact the tourist office about their two RV parking sites, one with waste disposal and showers near the castle (€5, May to September) and one on the river (free, October to April).

CAMPGROUND €

**Eating****L'Orangerie**

(02 54 78 05 36; [www.orangerie-du-chateau.fr](http://www.orangerie-du-chateau.fr); 1 av du Dr Jean Laigret; menus €33-77) Polish up those heels and dust off that suit! Tucked behind wrought-iron gates opposite the château, the Orangerie is cloud nine for connoisseurs of *haute cuisine*. Plates are artfully stacked (duck liver, langoustine, foie gras) and the sparkling *salon* would make Louis XIV green with envy. On summer nights, opt for a courtyard table. The only warning: desserts sometimes have jarring flavour combinations.

GASTRONOMIC €€€

**Les Banquettes Rouges**

(02 54 78 74 92; 16 rue des Trois Marchands; lunch menus €14.50, dinner menus €26-32; ☹Tue-Sat) Handwritten slate menus and wholesome food distinguish quiet, charming Red Benches: rabbit with marmalade, duck with lentils, and salmon with apple vinaigrette, all done with a spicy twist and a smile.

TRADITIONAL FRENCH €€

**Au Bouchon Lyonnais**

(02 54 74 12 87; 25 rue des Violettes; lunch/dinner menus €12.50/20) Classic neighbourhood bistro with a flavour of bygone days. The food is straight out of the Lyonnais cookbook: snails and duck steaks. Peasant food done to perfection.

LYONNAIS €€

**Le Castelet**

(02 54 74 66 09; 40 rue St-Lubin; lunch menus €15, dinner menus €18-32; ☹closed Wed & Sun;

TRADITIONAL FRENCH €€

☹☹) Rusticana and rural frescoes cover the walls of this country restaurant that emphasises seasonal ingredients, organics and vegetarian options.

**Self-Catering****Food Market**

(rue Anne de Bretagne; ☹8am-1pm Tue, Thu & Sat)

MARKET €

**8 à Huit**

(11 rue du Commerce; ☹8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 8am-noon Sun)

SUPERMARKET €

**Drinking**

The best bars are in the old town, particularly in the small alleys off rue Foulérie.

**Velvet Jazz Lounge**

(02 54 78 36 32; [www.velvetjazz.fr](http://www.velvetjazz.fr); 15bis rue Haute; ☹3pm-2am Tue-Sat) Lodged under artful lights, 13th-century vaults and contemplative Buddhas, Blois' funkier bar hosts regular jazz acts after dark, and in winter offers a selection of 30 (count 'em) hot chocolates in its alternative guise as an afternoon *salon de thé*.

JAZZ BAR

**Loch Ness Pub**

(02 54 56 08 67; cnr rue des Juifs & rue Pierre de Blois; ☹3pm-3am) The Scottish theme isn't convincing, but the boozing students and late-night drinkers don't seem to mind. Big-screen sports, karaoke and occasional gigs pack 'em in.

SCOTTISH BAR

**Information**

**Tourist office** (02 54 90 41 41; [www.bloispaysdechambord.com](http://www.bloispaysdechambord.com); 23 place du Château; ☹9am-7pm)

**Getting There & Away**

**BUS TLC** (02 54 58 55 44; [www.tlcinfo.net](http://www.tlcinfo.net)) runs a château shuttle as well as buses that depart from Blois' train station (tickets €2 on board):

**Beaugency** Line 16, 55 minutes, four Monday to Saturday, one Sunday

**Chambord** Line 3, 40 minutes, four Monday to Saturday, one Sunday

**Cheverny** Line 4, 45 minutes, six to eight Monday to Friday, two Saturday, one Sunday

**CAR** Some rental options:

**Avis** (02 54 45 10 61; train station)

**Europcar** (02 54 43 22 20; 4 rue Gutenberg)

**Ligérienne de Location** (02 54 78 25 45; 96-100 av de Vendôme)

## RIVER CRUISING

The Loire offers relatively few opportunities to get out on the water: the currents are often too unpredictable to navigate safely. But it's not completely off-limits.

**Croisières de Loire** (☎02 47 23 98 64; [www.labelandre.com](http://www.labelandre.com); adult/child €8.50/5.50;

☉Apr-Oct) Offers cruises of Chenonceau, with great views of the château.

**Ligérienne de Navigation** (☎02 47 52 68 88; [www.naviloire.com](http://www.naviloire.com); adult/child €9/6; ☉Apr-Nov) Runs one of the few cruises on the Loire proper, in a 66-seat boat departing from Rochecorbon to wild islets and nature reserves.

**Promenades en Futreau** (☎Blois Tourist Office 02 54 90 41 41; adult/child €9/6.50;

☉May-Aug) Sets out from the Blois quayside aboard a traditional *futreau* (flat-bottomed barge).

**La Margarettifera, La Candaise** (☎02 47 95 93 15; adult/child €9/6.50); **L'Hirondelle**

(☎02 41 95 14 23) Both use traditional high-cabined Loire vessels known as *toues*, departing from Candes-St-Martin.

**TRAIN** The train station is at the top of the hill on av Jean Laigret.

**Amboise** €11, 20 minutes, 10 daily

**Orléans** €13 to €20, 45 minutes, hourly

**Paris** Gares d'Austerlitz and Montparnasse  
€34 to €57, two hours, 26 daily

**Tours** €13 to €19, 40 minutes, 13 daily

## i Getting Around

**BICYCLE** The Châteaux à Vélo network (p357) offers 11 waymarked cycling routes in the Blois area.

**Detours de Loire** (☎02 54 56 07 73; train station; bikes per half-/full day €9/14)

**BUS** Local buses in Blois and nearby communities, including Cheverny are run by **TUB** (☎02 54 78 15 66; [www.tub-blois.fr](http://www.tub-blois.fr); 2 place Victor Hugo; ☉1.30-6pm Mon, 8am-noon & 1.30-6pm Tue-Fri, 9am-noon & 1.30-4.30pm Sat). Tickets cost €1.10. Buses run until about 8pm Monday to Saturday, with hardly any on Sunday.

**TAXI** Available at the train station; cell ☎02 54 78 07 65.

## Château de Chambord

For full-blown château splendour, you can't top **Chambord** (☎02 54 50 50 20; [www.chambord.org](http://www.chambord.org); adult/under-25yr €9.50/free; ☉9am-7.30pm mid-Jul-mid-Aug, 9am-6.15pm mid-Mar-mid-Jul & mid-Aug-Sep, 9am-5.15pm Jan-mid-Mar & Oct-Dec; 🏰), one of the crowning examples of French Renaissance architecture, and by far the largest, grandest and most visited château in the Loire Valley. It's worth picking up the multilingual audio-guide (adult/child version €4/2), if only to

avoid getting lost around the endless rooms and corridors.

Begun in 1519 as a weekend hunting lodge by François I, it quickly snowballed into one of the most ambitious (and expensive) architectural projects ever attempted by any French monarch. Though construction was repeatedly halted by financial problems, design setbacks and military commitments (not to mention the kidnapping of the king's two sons in Spain), by the time Chambord was finally finished 30-odd years later, the castle boasted some 440 rooms, 365 fireplaces and 84 staircases, not to mention a cityscape of turrets, chimneys and lanterns crowning its rooftop, and a famous **double-helix staircase**, reputedly designed by the king's chum, Leonardo da Vinci. Ironically, François ultimately found his elaborate palace too draughty, preferring the royal apartments in Amboise and Blois; he only stayed here for 42 days during his entire reign from 1515 to 1547.

Despite its apparent complexity, Chambord is laid out according to simple mathematical rules. Each section is arranged on a system of symmetrical grid squares around a Maltese cross. At the centre stands the rectangular **keep**, crossed by four great hallways, and at each corner stands one of the castle's four circular bastions. Through the centre of the keep winds the great staircase, with two intertwining flights of stairs leading up to the great **lantern tower** and the castle's rooftop, from where you can gaze out across the landscaped grounds and marvel at the Tolkienesque jumble of cupolas, domes, chimneys and lightning rods.

The most interesting rooms are on the 1st floor, including the **king's and queen's chambers** (complete with interconnecting passages to enable late-night nooky) and a wing devoted to the thwarted attempts of the Comte de Chambord to be crowned Henri V after the fall of the Second Empire. On the 2nd floor the eerie **Museum of Hunting** exhibits a copious display of weapons and hunting trophies. On the ground floor, an interesting multilanguage film relates the history of the castle's construction.

In a place of such ostentatious grandeur, it's often the smallest things that are most interesting: look out for the display of hundreds of cast-iron keys, one for each door in the château.

Several times daily there are 1½-hour **guided tours** (€4) in English, and during school holidays **costumed tours** entertain the kids. *Son et lumière* shows, known as Chambord, Rêve de Lumières, are projected onto the château's facade nightly from July to mid-September (adult/child €12/10). Outdoor spectacles held throughout summer include a daily **equestrian show** (☎02 54 20 31 01; www.ecuries-chambord.com, in French; adult/child €9.50/7; ☉May-Sep).

### DOMAINE NATIONAL DE CHAMBORD

This huge hunting reserve (the largest in Europe) stretches for 54 sq km around the château, and is reserved solely for the use of high-ranking French government personalities (though somehow it's difficult to imagine Sarkozy astride a galloping stallion). About 10 sq km of the park is publicly accessible, with trails open to walkers, mountain bikers and horse riders.

It's great for **wildlife-spotting**, especially in September and October during the deer mating season. Observation towers dot

the park; set out at dawn or dusk to spot stags, boars and red deer.

Hire bikes at a **rental kiosk** (☎02 54 33 37 54; per hr/half/full day €6/10/13; ☉Apr-Oct) near the *embarcadère* (jetty) on the River Cosson, where you can also rent boats. **Guided bike trips** (adult/child €10/6 plus bike hire) depart mid-August to September.

To see the rest of the reserve, jump aboard a **Land Rover Safari tour** (☎02 54 50 50 06; adult/child €18/10; ☉Apr-Sep), conducted by French-speaking guides with an intimate knowledge of where and when to see the best wildlife.

## i Getting There & Away

Chambord is 16km east of Blois, 45km south-west of Orléans and 17km northeast of Cheverny. For transport see p360 and p357.

## Château de Cheverny

Thought by many to be the most perfectly proportioned château of all, **Cheverny** (☎02 54 79 96 29; www.chateau-cheverny.fr; adult/child €7.50/3.60; ☉9.15am-6.45pm Jul & Aug, 9.15am-6.15pm Apr-Jun & Sep, 9.45am-5.30pm Oct, 9.45am-5pm Nov-Mar) represents the zenith of French classical architecture, the perfect blend of symmetry, geometry and aesthetic order.

Built from gleaming stone from the nearby Bourré quarries and surrounded by lush parkland, Cheverny is one of the few châteaux whose original architectural vision has survived the centuries practically unscathed. Since its construction between 1625 and 1634 by Jacques Hurault, an intendant to Louis XII, the castle has hardly been altered, and its interior decoration includes some of the most sumptuous furnishings, tapestries and objets d'art anywhere in the Loire Valley. The Hurault

### WORTH A TRIP

#### LUNCH BREAK

Need a moment to collect yourself between châteaux? Head to sleepy Bracieux, 7km south of Chambord, for a delicious, light lunch made with fresh seasonal ingredients.

**Au Fil de Temps** (☎02 54 46 03 84; 11 place de la Halle; kids' menus €8, lunch menus €15, mains €18-22; ☉Fri-Wed) beats all the tourist traps into the dust with their simple specialties like tender white asparagus with *beurre blanc* or savoury salmon fillets, all served with vigour and charm. Another diversion? Head over to the nearby **Max Vauché chocolate factory** (☎02 54 46 07 96; www.maxvauche-chocolatier.com; 22 Les Jardins du Moulin; tour adult/child €3.80/3; ☉10am-12.30pm & 2-7pm, closed Mon & Sun Sep-Jun) for a tour and a taste test!



## STAYING OVER

Located at the foot of Cheverny's long driveway, amid 3 hectares of grass-land, **La Levraudière** (☎02 54 79 81 99; <http://lalevraudiere.free.fr>; 1 chemin de la Levraudière; s incl breakfast €55, d €59-65, tr €75-83) is a perfect blend of the farmstyle and the modern. In a peaceful, renovated 19th-century farmhouse, the B&B has a slab-like wooden table for breakfasts featuring fabulous homemade jams. But the crisp linens and meticulously kept house are the opposite of roughing it.

family has owned (and inhabited) the castle for the last six centuries and their fabulous **art collection** includes a portrait of Jeanne of Aragon by Raphael's studio, an 18th-century De la Tour pastel, and a who's who of court painters. Keep your eyes open for the certificate signed by US President George Washington.

The interior was designed by Jean Monier, known for his work on Luxembourg Palace for Queen Marie de Médicis. Highlights include a **formal dining room** with panels depicting the story of Don Quixote, the **king's chamber** with murals relating stories from Greek mythology, a **bridal chamber** and **children's playroom** (complete with Napoléon III-era toys). The **guards' room** is full of pikestaffs, claymores and suits of armour – including a tiny one fit for a kid.

Behind the main château, the 18th-century **Orangerie**, where many priceless artworks, including the *Mona Lisa*, were stashed during WWII, is now a tearoom.

**Tintin** fans might find the château's facade oddly familiar: Hergé used it as a model (minus the two end towers) for Moulin-sart (Marlinspike) Hall, the ancestral home of Tintin's irascible sidekick, Captain Haddock. A dynamic exhibition, **Les Secrets de Moulin-sart** (combined ticket with château adult/child €12/7), explores the Tintin connections with re-created scenes, thunder and other special effects.

Near the château's gateway, the **kennels** house pedigreed French pointer/English foxhound hunting dogs still used by the owners of Cheverny: feeding time, known as the **Soupe des Chiens**, takes place daily

at 5pm April to September and 3pm October to March.

## i Getting There & Away

Cheverny is 16km southeast of Blois and 17km southwest of Chambord. For transport see p360 and p357.

## Château de Chaumont

Set on a defensible bluff behind the Loire, **Chaumont-sur-Loire** (☎02 54 20 99 22; [www.domaine-chaumont.fr](http://www.domaine-chaumont.fr), in French; adult/child €9/3.50; ☉10am-6.30pm Apr-Sep, to 5pm or 6pm Oct-Mar) presents a resolutely medieval face, with its cylindrical corner turrets and sturdy drawbridge, but the interior mostly dates from the 19th century.

At least two earlier fortresses occupied the site (whose name derives from Chauve Mont, 'Bald Hill'), but the main phase of construction for the present château began sometime around 1465 under Pierre d'Amboise. Originally a strictly defensive fortress, the castle became a short-lived residence for Catherine de Médicis following the death of Henry II in 1560, and later passed into the hands of Diane de Poitiers (Henry II's mistress), who was forced to swap the altogether grander surroundings of Chenonceau for Chaumont by the ruthless Catherine.

The château was thoroughly renovated by Princess de Broglie, heiress to the Say sugar fortune, who bought it in 1875 (and knocked down one entire wing to provide a better view of the river). The most impressive room is the **Council Chamber**, with its original maiolica-tiled floor, plun-

## ROYAL MENAGERIE

As you visit the Loire's splendiferous châteaux, you may see some surprising zoological emblems etched into the walls, ceilings, towers and floors.

See if you can spot:

- » Porcupine: Louis XII
- » Salamander in flames: François I
- » Ermine: Queen Claude
- » Stag: Jean II
- » Winged stag: Charles V and Charles VII
- » Genet (sort of like a spotted civet): Charles VI

dered from a palace in Palermo, but the château's finest architecture is arguably reserved for the **Écuries** (stables), built in 1877 to house the Broglies' horses in truly sumptuous style (the thoroughbreds all had their own personal padded stalls). A collection of vintage carriages is now displayed inside.

Chaumont's English-style park hosts the annual **Festival International des Jardins** (International Garden Festival; ☎02 54 20 99 22; [www.chaumont-jardins.com](http://www.chaumont-jardins.com); adult/child €9.50/7.50; ☀9.30am-sunset) between May and mid-October.

## Getting There & Away

Chaumont-sur-Loire is 17km southwest of Blois. Onzain, a 2.5km walk from Chaumont across the Loire, has trains to Blois (€11, 10 minutes, 13 daily) and Tours (€11 to €15, 35 minutes, 10 daily).

## Château de Beauregard

Less visited than its sister châteaux, peaceful **Beauregard** (☎02 54 70 40 05; [www.beauregard-loire.com](http://www.beauregard-loire.com); adult/child €8/6.50; ☀9.30am-6.30pm Jun-Aug, 9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Apr-May & Sep-Oct, 9.30am-noon & 2-5pm Nov, Feb & Mar, closed Dec & Jan & Wed Oct-Mar) has special charms all of its own. Built as yet another hunting lodge by François I, the highlight is an amazing **portrait gallery** depicting 327 notables of European royalty, clergy and intelligentsia. Spot famous faces including Christopher Columbus, Sir Francis Drake, Cardinal Richelieu, Catherine de Médicis, Anne de Bretagne, Henry VIII of England and his doomed wife Anne Boleyn, and every French king since Philippe VI. The quiet, 40-hectare grounds encompass numerous **gardens**, including the Garden of Portraits with 12 colour variations.

## TOURAINNE

Often dubbed the 'Garden of France', the Touraine region is famous for its rich food, tasty cheeses and notoriously pure French accent, as well as a smattering of glorious châteaux: some medieval (Langeais and Loches), others Renaissance (Azay-le-Rideau, Villandry and Chenonceau). The peppy capital, Tours, makes a good base, with castle tours and transportation links.

## Tours

POP 139,958

Bustling Tours has a life of its own despite being one of the hubs of castle country. It's a smart, vivacious kind of place, filled with wide 18th-century boulevards, parks and imposing public buildings, as well as a busy university of some 25,000 students. Hovering somewhere between the style of Paris and the conservative sturdiness of central France, Tours makes a useful staging post for exploring the Touraine, with Azay-le-Rideau, Villandry and Langeais all a short drive away.

## Sights & Activities

The old city encircles place Plumereau (locally known as place Plum), about 400m west of rue Nationale.

### Musée des Beaux-Arts

ART MUSEUM

(☎02 47 05 68 73; 18 place François Sicard; adult/child €4/2; ☀9am-6pm Wed-Mon) Originally the archbishop's gorgeous palace, the Musée des Beaux-Arts is now a fine example of a French provincial arts museum, with grand rooms decorated to reflect the period of the artworks on display. Look out for works by Delacroix, Degas and Monet, as well as a rare Rembrandt miniature and a Rubens *Madonna and Child*. The massive 1804 Lebanese cedar in front of the museum measures a whopping 7.5m around the base. Wheelchair accessible.

### Cathédrale St-Gatien

CATHEDRAL

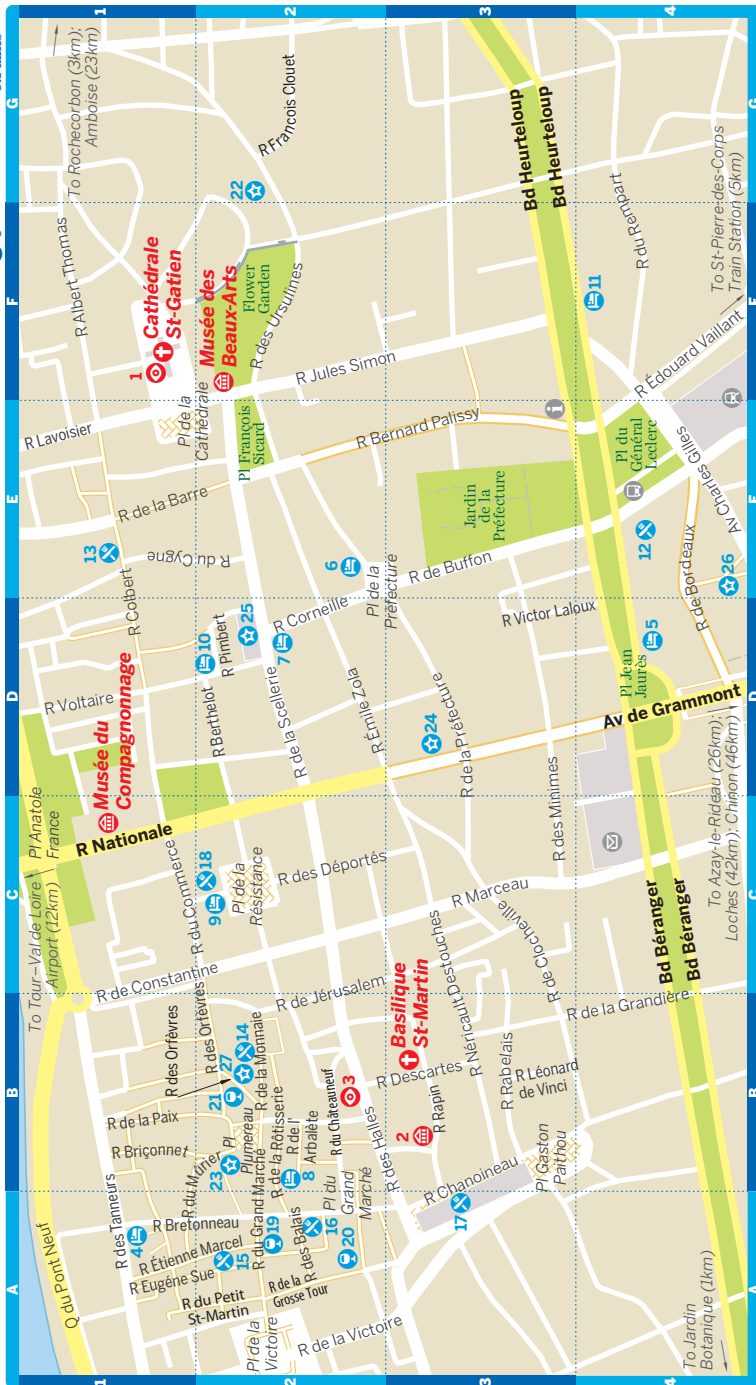
(place de la Cathédrale; ☀9am-7pm) With its twin west towers stretching skyward through a latticework of Gothic decorations, flying buttresses and gargoyles, this cathedral's a show-stopper. It is especially known for its intricate stained glass, particularly the rose windows above the organ. The interior dates from the 13th to 16th centuries, and the domed tops of the two 70m-high towers date from the Renaissance. On the north side, the **Cloître de la Psallette** (adult/child €2.50/free; ☀9.30am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat, 2-6pm Sun, closed Mon & Tue Oct-Mar) was built from 1442 to 1524.



### Musée du Compagnonnage

CRAFT MUSEUM

(☎02 47 21 62 20; 8 rue Nationale, in Cloître St-Julien; adult/child €5/3.30; ☀9am-noon & 2-6pm, closed Tue mid-Sep-mid-Jun) France has long prided itself on the work of its 20,000-odd *compagnons* (craftsmen), whose unique skills have been in demand since the first



## Tours

### 📍 Top Sights

|                              |    |
|------------------------------|----|
| Basilique St-Martin .....    | B3 |
| Cathédrale St-Gatien .....   | F1 |
| Musée des Beaux-Arts .....   | F2 |
| Musée du Compagnonnage ..... | C1 |

### 📍 Sights

|                                |    |
|--------------------------------|----|
| 1 Cloître de la Psalette ..... | F1 |
| 2 Musée St-Martin .....        | B3 |
| 3 Tour Charlemagne .....       | B2 |

### 🛏 Sleeping

|   |    |
|---|----|
| 4 Auberge de Jeunesse du Vieux<br>Tours ..... | A1 |
| 5 Hôtel de l'Univers .....                    | D4 |
| 6 Hôtel des Arts .....                        | E2 |
| 7 Hôtel du Théâtre .....                      | D2 |
| 8 Hôtel l'Adresse .....                       | B2 |
| 9 Hôtel Mondial .....                         | C2 |
| 10 Hôtel Ronsard .....                        | D2 |
| 11 Hôtel Val de Loire .....                   | F4 |

### 🍴 Eating

|                             |    |
|-----------------------------|----|
| 12 Atac Supermarket .....   | E4 |
| 13 Cap Sud .....            | E1 |
| 14 Comme Autre Fouée .....  | B2 |
| 15 L'Atelier Gourmand ..... | A2 |
| 16 Le Zinc .....            | A2 |
| 17 Les Halles .....         | A3 |
| 18 Tartines & Co .....      | C2 |

### 🍷 Drinking

|                      |    |
|----------------------|----|
| 19 Bistro 64 .....   | A2 |
| 20 La Canteen .....  | A2 |
| 21 L'Alexandra ..... | B2 |

### 🎬 Entertainment

|                             |    |
|-----------------------------|----|
| 22 Cinémas Studio .....     | G2 |
| 23 Excalibur .....          | B2 |
| 24 Fnac Billeterie .....    | D3 |
| 25 Grand Théâtre .....      | D2 |
| 26 Le Paradis Vert .....    | E4 |
| 27 Les Trois Orfèvres ..... | B2 |

showpiece cathedrals started appearing in the early Middle Ages (when the Statue of Liberty was restored in the mid-1980s, French *compagnons* were responsible for the intricate metalwork). In addition to traditional professions such as stonemasonry, carpentry and blacksmithing, the *compagnonnages* (guild organisations) welcome in many metiers, including pastry chefs, coopers and locksmiths. Learn their history and view the masterpieces they create at the end of their apprenticeships (which last

from three to 10 years). Works range from exquisitely carved chests and staircases to handmade tools, booby-trapped locks and enormous cakes (one took 800 hours to make, in the shape of Hospices de Beaune, with 20kg of dough and tiny sheets of gelatin for windows).

### Basilique St-Martin

CHURCH

Tours was once an important pilgrimage city thanks to the soldier-turned-evangelist St Martin (c 317–97), bishop of Tours in the 4th century. After his death a Romanesque basilica was constructed above his tomb, but today only the north tower, the **Tour Charlemagne**, remains. A replacement basilica was built in 1862 on a new site a short distance south along rue Descartes to house his relics, while the small **Musée St-Martin** (📍02 47 64 48 87; 3 rue Rapin; adult/concession €2/1; 🕒9am–12.30pm & 2–5.30pm Wed–Sun) displays artefacts relating to the lost church.

### Jardin Botanique

BOTANICAL GARDEN

(bd Tonnelle; 🕒7.45am–sunset) Tours has several public parks, including the 19th-century botanic garden, a 5-hectare landscaped park with a tropical greenhouse, medicinal herb garden and petting zoo. The park is 1.6km west of place Jean Jaurès; bus 4 along bd Béranger stops nearby.

## 👉 Tours

### Walks

WALKING TOURS

The tourist office offers an **audioguide** (€5) for a two-hour self-guided tour or various **guided tours** (adult/child €5.60/4.60) in French.

### Train

TRAIN TOUR

(📍04 75 07 45 53; adult/child €6/3) Forty-minute tours leave the tourist office seven times daily.

### Carriages

CARRIAGE TOUR

(€1.25; 🕒10am, 11am, 3pm, 4pm & 5pm Tue–Sat, 3pm, 4pm & 5pm Sun May–Sep) Fifty-minute rides depart from place François Sicard near the cathedral. Drivers sell tickets.

## 🛏 Sleeping

Tours has high-calibre rooms for the prices.

### Hôtel Ronsard

BOUTIQUE HOTEL €

(📍02 47 05 25 36; www.hotel-ronsard.com; 2 rue Pimbert; s €53–67, d €59–72; 🍷🍷🍷) Completely renovated in 2010 with sleek modern rooms, the Ronsard is centrally located, comfortable and good value. The halls are

lined with colourful photographs and immaculate rooms incorporate muted tones of grey with sparkling white linens. Includes perks like air-con in summer and bike parking.

### Hôtel l'Adresse

BOUTIQUE HOTEL €€

(☎02 47 20 85 76; [www.hotel-ladresse.com](http://www.hotel-ladresse.com); 12 rue de la Rôtisserie; s €50, d €70-100; 🍷🍷) Looking for Parisian style in provincial Tours? Then you're in luck. On a walking street in the old quarter lies a boutique bonanza, with rooms finished in slates, creams and ochres, topped off with flat-screen TVs, designer sinks and reclaimed rafters. Best are the ones with shuttered balconies over the bustling street.

### Hôtel de l'Univers

HOTEL €€€

(☎02 47 05 37 12; [www.hotel-univers.fr](http://www.hotel-univers.fr); 5 bd Heurteloup; d €198-270; 🍷🍷🍷) Everyone from Ernest Hemingway to Edith Piaf has bunked at the Universe over its 150-year history, and it's still a prestigious address. Previous guests gaze down from the frescoed balcony above the lobby (find Churchill and Edward VII), and rooms are appropriately glitzy: huge beds, gleaming bathrooms. Wheelchair accessible. Parking €15.

### Hôtel Mondial

HOTEL €€

(☎02 47 05 62 68; [www.hotelmondialtours.com](http://www.hotelmondialtours.com); 3 place de la Résistance; s €52-72, d €64-87; 🍷) This hotel boasts a fantastic city-centre position. The modernised, metropolitan attic rooms in funky greys, browns and scarlets are the nicest, but even the older-style ones are decent. Reception is on the second floor and there is no lift.

### Hôtel des Arts

HOTEL €

(☎02 47 05 05 00; [www.hoteldesartstours.com](http://www.hoteldesartstours.com); 40 rue de la Préfecture; s €32-45, d €47-50; 🍷) A sweet place, with charming management, it has tiny but fastidious and cheery rooms in oranges and siennas. Get one with a balcony for extra light. Public parking across the street.

### Hôtel Val de Loire

HOTEL €

(☎02 47 05 37 86; [www.hotelvaldeloire.fr](http://www.hotelvaldeloire.fr); 33 bd Heurteloup; s €45-48, d €50-60; 🍷) Higgledy-piggledy rooms with period features including parquet floors and leather chairs, as well as double glazing to dampen road noise. Top-floor rooms are jammed into the rafters; ask for one lower down for more space.

### Hôtel du Théâtre

HOTEL €

(☎02 47 05 31 29; [www.hotel-du-theatre37.com](http://www.hotel-du-theatre37.com); 57 rue de la Scellerie; s €59-64, d €64-70;

🍷) As its name suggests, this characterful hotel is down the street from the city theatre. Inside, a spiral staircase reaches up a tiny timber-framed foyer to the 1st-floor lobby; rooms are comfortably old-fashioned with spotless bathrooms.

### Auberge de Jeunesse du Vieux Tours

HOSTEL €

(☎02 47 37 81 58; [www.ajtours.org](http://www.ajtours.org); 5 rue Bretonneau; dm €19.50; ☺reception 8am-noon & 5-11pm; 🍷🍷) Friendly, bustling Hostelling International hostel (membership €7 per year; required) with a large foreign-student and young-worker contingent; there are lots of small kitchens and lounges. No en suite bathrooms, and the shared ones are a bit rough. Rents bikes.



### Eating

Place Plumereau is crammed with cheap eats, but the quality can be variable.



### Cap Sud

GASTRONOMIC BISTRO €€

(☎02 47 05 24 81; 88 rue Colbert; lunch menus €14.50-17, dinner menus €19.50-36; ☺Tue-Sat) The hot mod red interior combines nicely with the genial service. And the food! The food! Sensitive, refined creations are made from the freshest ingredients presented in style. Dishes are along the lines of tender braised pork with creamy polenta and baby vegetables, or octopus and tuna with a green curry chantilly and cherry tomatoes. Reserve ahead.

### Tartines & Co

GOURMET SANDWICHES €

(☎02 47 20 50 60; 6 rue des Fusillés; sandwiches €9-10, lunch menus €13.70; ☺lunch Tue-Sat, dinner Wed-Fri; 🍷) This snazzy little bistro reinvents the traditional *croque* (toasted sandwich) amid jazz and friendly chatter. Choose your topping (chicken, roasted veg, carpaccio beef) and it's served up quick as a flash on toasted artisanal bread. Or go rich with foie gras with artichokes and honey vinaigrette (€12.90).

### Le Zinc

TRADITIONAL FRENCH €€

(☎02 47 20 29 00; 27 place du Grand Marché; menus €19-26; ☺closed Wed & lunch Sun) One of the new breed of French bistros that's more concerned with simple, classic staples and market-fresh ingredients (sourced direct from the local Halles) than Michelin stars and *haute cuisine* cachet. Country dishes (duck breast, beef fillet, river fish) shine in a buzzy dining room. Attractive and authentic.

**L'Atelier Gourmand** GASTRONOMIC BISTRO €€  
(02 47 38 59 87; 37 rue Étienne Marcel; menu €23; ☺lunch Tue-Fri, dinner Mon-Sat) Another one for the foodies, but you'll need your dark glasses: the fuchsia-and-silver colour scheme is straight out of a Bret Easton Ellis novel. There's no quibbling with the food: hunks of roast lamb, green-pepper duck and authentic bouillabaisse, delivered with a modern spin.

**Comme Autre Fouée** REGIONAL CUISINE €€  
(02 47 05 94 78; 11 rue de la Monnaie; lunch menus €10, dinner menus €16-21; ☺lunch Tue-Thu, Sat & Sun, dinner Tue-Sat) For local flavour, you can't top this place, which churns out the house speciality of *fouées*, a pita-like disc of dough stuffed with pork rillettes, white beans or goat's cheese.

### Self-Catering

**Les Halles** DAILY MARKET  
(place Gaston Pailhou; ☺7am-7pm)

**Atac** SUPERMARKET  
(5 place du Général Leclerc; ☺7.30am-8pm Mon-Sat)



### Drinking

Place Plumereau and the surrounding streets are plastered with grungy bars and drinking dens, all of which get stuffed to bursting on hot summer nights.

**Bistro 64** JAZZ BAR  
(02 47 38 47 40; 64 rue du Grand Marché; ☺11am-2am Mon-Sat) One step removed from the place Plum hustle. Scuffed-up decor, jazz combos and plenty of house beers keep the local crowd happy.

**La Canteen** WINE BAR  
(02 47 34 74 10 30; 10 rue de la Grosse Tour; ☺noon-2.30pm & 7.30-11pm Mon-Sat) For something smoother and sexier, swing by this designer wine bar, where rough stone walls sit alongside leather sofas, razor-sharp tables and a neon-lit bar.

**L'Alexandra** ENGLISH BAR  
(106 rue du Commerce; ☺noon-2am Mon-Fri, 3pm-2am Sat & Sun; ☺) Popular Anglo-Saxon bar crammed with students and late-night boozers.



### Entertainment

Get the low-down from the free monthly *Tours.infos* ([www.tours.fr](http://www.tours.fr); in French), available all over town. Buy event tickets at **Fnac billetterie** (02 08 92 68 36 22; 72 rue Nationale).

**Le Paradis Vert** POOL HALL  
(02 47 66 00 94; 9 rue Michelet; adult/student pool table per hr €10/8; ☺10am-2am; ☺) Fast Eddie eat your heart out! France's biggest pool hall is right here in Tours, with 36 tables and a weekly pool contest open to all comers.

**Les Trois Orfèvres** MUSIC CLUB  
(02 47 64 02 73; 6 rue des Orfèvres; admission €3-10; ☺11pm-5am Wed-Sat) Grungy night-spot in the heart of the medieval quarter, where DJs and bands lean towards alternative and indie, and the students hang out in force.

**Excalibur** DANCE CLUB  
(02 47 64 76 78; 35 rue Briçonnet; ☺11pm-6am Tue-Sat) Hot-and-heavy club lodged in a converted ecclesiastical building. Has varied music, from pop to drum-and-bass, which packs in Tourangeaux (residents of Tours) clubbers.

**Grand Théâtre** THEATRE  
(02 47 60 20 20; 34 rue de la Scellerie; ☺box office 9.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5.45pm Mon-Sat, also & 30min before performances) Hosts opera ([www.operadetours.fr](http://www.operadetours.fr), in French) and symphonic music.

**Cinéma Studio** CINEMA  
(02 08 92 68 37 01; [www.studiocine.com](http://www.studiocine.com), in French; 2 rue des Ursulines)

## i Information

**Alli@nce Micro** (7 rue de la Monnaie; per hr €2; ☺9.30am-6pm Mon-Sat) Internet access.

**Police Station** (02 47 33 80 69; 70-72 rue Marceau; ☺24hr)

**Post office** (1 bd Béranger) Exchanges currency.

**SOS Médecins** (02 47 38 33 33) Phone advice for medical emergencies.

**Top Communication** (68-70 rue de la Grand Marché; per hr €2; ☺10.30am-10pm Mon-Sat) Internet access.

**Tourist office** (02 47 70 37 37; [www.ligeris.com](http://www.ligeris.com)) main office (78-82 rue Bernard Palissy; ☺8.30am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-12.30pm & 2.30-5pm Sun); place Plumereau (Tout Le Val de Loire; 1 place Plumereau) Buy château tickets at a slight reduction. The annexe at place Plumereau gives info but doesn't sell tickets.

## i Getting There & Away

**Tours-Val de Loire Airport** (02 47 49 37 00; [www.tours-aeroport.fr](http://www.tours-aeroport.fr)), about 5km northeast of town, is linked to London's Stansted, Dublin, Marseille and Porto by Ryanair.



**BUS** The information desk for **Touraine Fil Vert** (☎02 47 31 14 00; [www.touraine-filvert.com](http://www.touraine-filvert.com), in French; tickets €1.70; ☺information desk 8am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-6.30pm Sat) is at the bus station next to the train station. Destinations in the *Indre-et-Loire département*: Line C to Amboise (35 minutes, 12 daily Monday to Saturday) and Chenonceau (1¼ hours, two daily).

**CAR** Tours' one-way system makes driving a headache, so you'll be glad to park your car. Use an **underground garage** (per 24hrs €10) for stays of more than two hours; check opening hours for the garage you choose, many are reduced on Sundays.

Some car-hire options near the station:

**Avis** (☎02 47 20 53 27; train station)

**Ecoto** (☎02 47 66 75 00; [www.ecoto.fr](http://www.ecoto.fr); 8 rue Marcel Tribut)

**TRAIN** Tours is the Loire Valley's main rail hub. The train station is linked to St-Pierre-des-Corps, Tours' TGV train station, by frequent shuttle trains.

**Amboise** €11, 20 minutes, 12 daily

**Angers** €23 to €34, one hour, 26 daily

**Blois** €9.10, 40 minutes, 12 daily

**Chenonceau** €11, 30 minutes, eight daily

**Loches** €11, 50 minutes, one or two daily

**Orléans** €24 to €35, one to 1½ hours, hourly

**Paris Gare d'Austerlitz** €41 to €62, two to 2¾ hours, five daily (slow trains)

**Paris Gare Montparnasse** €44 to €83, 1¼ hours, 30 daily (high-speed TGVs)

**Saumur** €14 to €21, 35 minutes, hourly

TGV trains from Tours also serve Bordeaux (€40 to €62, 2¾ hours), La Rochelle (€35 to €48, 2½ to 3¼ hours) and Nantes (€28 to €55, 1½ hours).

## **i** Getting Around

**TO/FROM THE AIRPORT** A shuttle bus (€5) leaves the bus station 1½ to two hours before and half an hour after each flight.

**BICYCLE** For hire, try **Détours de Loire** (☎02 47 61 22 23; [www.locationdevelos.com](http://www.locationdevelos.com); 35 rue Charles Gille; per day/week €14/59), part of the **Loire à Vélo** ([www.loireavevelo.fr](http://www.loireavevelo.fr)) network, or **Vélomania** (☎02 47 05 10 11; [www.velo-maniatours.fr](http://www.velo-maniatours.fr), in French; 109 rue Colbert; per day/week €14.50/50.50; ☎10.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-7.30pm Mon-Sat).

**BUS** Local buses, run by **Fil Bleu** (☎02 47 66 70; [www.filbleu.fr](http://www.filbleu.fr), in French; information office 9 rue Michelet; ☎7.30am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5pm Sun), stop near place Jean-Jaurès. Tickets cost €1.25. Most lines run until about 8.30pm; several night buses run until about 1am. The informa-

tion office is on rue Michelet, off av Charles Gilles (near the train station).

## Vouvray

Chenin blanc vineyards carpet the area around Vouvray (population 3161) and Montlouis-sur-Loire, 10km east of Tours, and wine cellars sprinkle the region. Contact the **tourist office** (☎02 47 52 68 73; 12 rue Rabelais; ☎9.30am-1pm & 2-6.30pm, closed Sun & Mon Nov-Apr) for a list of local wine sellers, or stop in to **Cave des Producteurs de Vouvray** (☎02 47 52 75 03; [www.cp-vouvray.com](http://www.cp-vouvray.com); 38 la Vallée Coquette) for a tour and tasting.

**Château de Moncontour** (☎02 47 52 60 77; [www.moncontour.com](http://www.moncontour.com), in French; Vouvray; ☎10am-1pm & 2-7pm, closed Sun mid-Sep-Mar) also does tastings and has a small wine museum.

Fil Bleu bus 61 links Tours' train station with Vouvray (€1.25, 20 minutes, 10 daily).

## Château de Chenonceau

Spanning the languid Cher River via a series of supremely graceful arches, the castle of **Chenonceau** (☎02 47 23 90 07; [www.chenonceau.com](http://www.chenonceau.com); adult/child €10.50/8, audioguide €4.50; ☎9am-8pm Jul & Aug, 9am-7.30pm Jun & Sep, 9am-7pm Apr & May, 9.30am-5pm or 6pm rest of year) is one of the most elegant and unusual in the Loire Valley. You can't help but be swept up in the magical architecture and the glorious surroundings: exquisite formal gardens and landscaped parkland.

This architectural fantasy land is largely the work of several remarkable women (hence its alternative name, Le Château des Dames: 'Ladies' Château'). The initial phase of construction started in 1515 for Thomas Bohier, a court minister of King Charles VIII, although much of the work and design was actually overseen by his wife, Katherine Briçonnet. The château's distinctive arches and one of the formal gardens were added by Diane de Poitiers, mistress of King Henri II. Following Henri's death, Diane was forced to exchange Chenonceau for the rather less grand château of Chaumont by the king's scheming widow, Catherine de Médicis, who completed the construction and added the huge yew-tree **labyrinth** and the western rose garden. Louise of Lorraine's most interesting contribution was her **mourning room**, on the top floor, all

# Châteaux of the Loire Valley

French history is written across the landscape of the Loire. Every castle traces a tale: of wars won and lost, romances embarked upon or destroyed, alliances forged and enemies vanquished. From the shockingly grand to the quietly subdued, there should be a castle to match your own mood.

## Chambord

**1** Château de Chambord gets all the hype for a reason: it's stunning. Visit in the early morning to see it rise, all towers and turrets, from the mist – making it possible to imagine it in the days of François I (p361).

## Chenonceau

**2** Like an elegant lady, Chenonceau effortlessly occupies its beautiful surroundings. The impressive arches that span the calm Cher River draw you in, while the exquisite decor and the fascinating history keep you captivated (p369).

## Azay-le-Rideau

**3** A cypress-lined drive leads to this comparatively discreet and certainly romantic castle beautifully reflected in its still, broad moat. Fantastic views of the château from the lush park are lit up at night (p376).

## Langeais

**4** Over the centuries châteaux change hands, alterations are made... but in the case of Langeais, the details are intact. The 10th-century keep and the intricate medieval interior take you to a time of valiant knights and mysterious ladies (p375).

## Angers

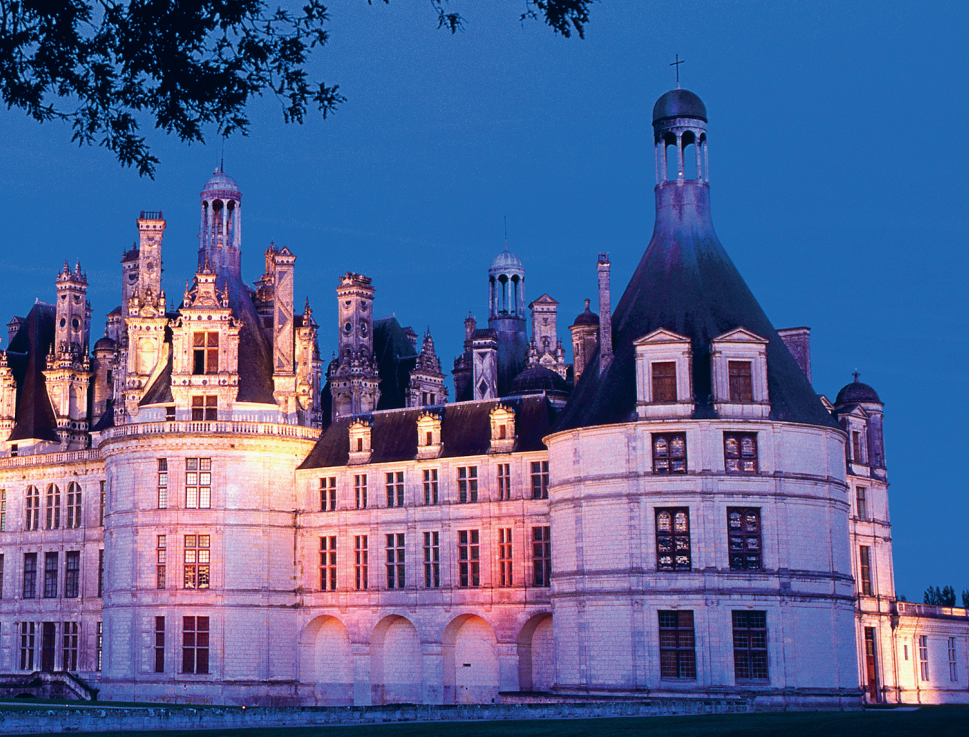
**5** Whether for its distinctive black stone and watchtowers or for its mind-blowing medieval tapestry, Château d'Angers stands out from the crowd. The forbidding exterior hides a jewel-box of riches (p384).

### Clockwise from top left

- 1.** Château de Chambord **2.** Château de Chenonceau  
**3.** Château d'Azay-le-Rideau







2

ADINA TOV ANSEL



in black, to which she retreated when her husband, Henri III, was assassinated.

Chenonceau had a heyday under the aristocratic Madame Dupin, who made the château a centre of fashionable 18th-century society and attracted guests including Voltaire and Rousseau (the latter tutored her son). Legend also has it that it was she who single-handedly saved the château from destruction during the Revolution, thanks to her popularity with the local villagers.

The château's interior is crammed with wonderful furniture and tapestries, several stunning original tiled floors and a fabulous **art collection** including works by Tintoretto, Correggio, Rubens, Murillo, Van Dyck and Ribera.

The *pièce de resistance* is the 60m-long window-lined **Grande Gallerie** spanning the Cher, scene of many a wild party hosted by Catherine de Médicis or Madame Dupin. During WWII the Cher also marked the boundary between free and occupied France; local legend has it that the Grand Gallery was used as the escape route for many refugees fleeing the Nazi occupation.

Skip the drab wax museum (€2) and instead visit the **gardens**: it seems as if there's one of every kind imaginable (maze, English, vegetable, playground, flower...). In July and August the illuminated château and grounds are open for the **Promenade Nocturne** (adult/child €5/free).

## Getting There & Away

The château is 34km east of Tours, 10km south-east of Amboise and 40km southwest of Blois. There are trains and buses from all three towns, and you can take boat trips from the château in summer (see p361).

### MONTRICHARD

Sitting quietly under a dramatic 12th-century donjon (keep), Montrichard, 9km east of Chenonceau, offers a fizzy pit stop. The 15km-long **Caves Monmousseau** (☎02 54 32 35 15; www.monmousseau.com; 1 rue du Pont) are carved into the tufa stone under the donjon: a perfect 12°C environment for the local *crémant* (sparkling wine). A 45-minute tour (adult/child €2.75/free) explains the winemaking methods and ends with a copious tasting.

## Amboise

POP 12,929

The childhood home of Charles VIII and the final resting place of the great Leonardo da Vinci, elegant Amboise is pleasantly perched on the southern bank of the Loire and overlooked by its fortified 15th-century château. With some seriously posh hotels and a wonderful weekend market, Amboise has become a very popular base for exploring nearby châteaux, and coach tours arrive en masse to visit da Vinci's Clos Lucé.

## Sights & Activities

Go to sights early in the day to avoid crowds and buy tickets in advance at the tourist office during high season.

### Château Royal d'Amboise

CASTLE

(☎02 47 57 00 98; place Michel Debré; adult/child €10/6.50; ☉9am-6pm, 9am-5.30pm Mar, 9am-12.30pm & 2-4.45pm Jan-Feb & mid-Nov-Dec) Sprawling across a gorgeously situated rocky escarpment with panoramic views of the river and surrounding countryside, the easily defendable castle presented a formidable prospect to would-be attackers, but in fact saw little military action. It was more often used as a weekend getaway from the official royal seat at nearby Blois. Charles VIII (r 1483-98) was born and brought up here, and was responsible for the château's Italianate remodelling in 1492. François I (r 1515-47), who constructed Chambord, also grew up here alongside his sister Margaret of Angoulême, and later invited da Vinci to work at nearby ClosLucé under his patronage.

Today just a few of the original 15th- and 16th-century structures survive, notably the **Flamboyant Gothic wing** and the **Chapelle St-Hubert**, a small chapel dedicated to the patron saint of hunting (note the carved stag horns and hunting friezes outside) and believed to be the final resting place of da Vinci. The interior highlights include a **guards' room** and a vaulted **Council Chamber** decorated with the initials of Charles VIII and his wife, Anne de Bretagne. Charles died suddenly in 1498 after hitting his head on a lintel while playing *jeu de paume* (an early form of tennis); the widowed Anne was later forced to remarry the new king, Louis XII.

From 1848 to 1852, Abd el-Kader, the leader of the Algerian resistance against French colonialism, was imprisoned here with his family and entourage; a monu-

ment in the château's landscaped grounds commemorates the event.

Exit the château through **Tour Hurtault** on an ingenious sloping spiral ramp designed to allow carriages and horses to easily ascend to the château from the town below.



### Le Clos Lucé

HISTORIC MANSION

(☎02 47 57 00 73; [www.vinci-closluc.com](http://www.vinci-closluc.com); 2 rue du Clos Lucé; adult/child €12.50/7.50; ☎9am-7pm) Leonardo da Vinci (pronounced van-see in French) took up residence in the grand manor house at Le Clos Lucé in 1516 on the invitation of François I, who was greatly enamoured with the Italian Renaissance. Already 64 by the time he arrived, da Vinci spent his time sketching, tinkering and dreaming up new contraptions: the house is jammed with scale models of many of his inventions. The expansive, beautiful gardens wind through forest and stream and are dotted with full-size replicas of his inventions including a protoautomobile, tank, bridges, hydraulic turbine and even a primitive helicopter. He died here on 2 May 1519.

### Pagode de Chanteloup

PAGODA

(☎02 47 57 20 97; [www.pagode-chanteloup.com](http://www.pagode-chanteloup.com), in French; adult/child €8.50/6.50; ☎10am-7pm; 🚶) Two kilometres south of Amboise, the curious Pagode de Chanteloup was built between 1775 and 1778 when the odd blend of classical French architecture and Chinese motifs were all the rage. Clamber to the top for glorious views of the surrounding park and the forested Loire Valley. Picnic hampers (€12 to €26) are sold in summer, and you can while away the afternoon larking about in a rowboat or playing free outdoor games.

### Parc de Mini-Châteaux

MINI-CASTLES

(☎08 25 08 25 22; [www.mini-chateaux.com](http://www.mini-chateaux.com); adult/child €13.50/9.50; ☎10am-7pm; 🚶) Intricate scale models of 44 of the Loire Valley's most famous châteaux. Squint a bit and it's almost as good as a hot-air balloon trip over the Loire for a fraction of the price.



### Tours

#### Segway

SEGWAY TOUR

(per 15min €10) Zip around town on a Segway PT from the tourist office.

#### Train

TRAIN TOUR

(adult/child €6/4.50) Six trains daily depart from the château, with French and English commentary.



### Sleeping

Amboise has some of the smartest places to stay in the Loire Valley, but you'll need deep pockets and to book ahead.

#### Le Pavillon des Lys

BOUTIQUE HOTEL €€

(☎02 47 30 01 01; [www.pavillondeslys.com](http://www.pavillondeslys.com); 9 rue d'Orange; d €98-160; 🚶) Beautiful hotel drenched with the kind of chichi style more suited to the Côte d'Azur. Take a cappuccino-coloured 18th-century town house and fill it with designer lamps, just-so furniture, roll-top baths, hi-fis and deep sofas, and you're halfway there; then chuck in a locally renowned restaurant, an elegant patio garden and boutiquey treats. Parking available.

#### Villa Mary

B&B €€

(☎02 47 23 03 31; [www.villa-mary.fr](http://www.villa-mary.fr); 14 rue de la Concorde; d incl breakfast €90-120) Four tip-top rooms in an impeccably furnished 18th-century town house, crammed with beeswaxed antiques, glittering chandeliers and antique rugs. Choose from Red, Violet, Pink and Blue, all with period pieces and patterned wallpaper; two have separate bathrooms across the corridor. Parking available.

#### Le Clos d'Amboise

HISTORIC HOTEL €€

(☎02 47 30 10 20; [www.leclosamboise.com](http://www.leclosamboise.com); 27 rue Rabelais; r €97-149; 🚶) Another posh pad finished with oodles of style and lashings of luxurious fabrics. Features range from wood panelling to antique beds; some rooms have separate sitting areas, others original fireplaces. The best give views over the manicured grounds and pool. There's even a sauna and gym in the old stables. Parking available.

#### Hôtel Blason

HOTEL €

(☎02 47 23 22 41; [www.leblason.fr](http://www.leblason.fr); 11 place Richelieu; s/d/tr €45/55/70; 🚶) Quirky, creaky budget hotel, on a quiet square in a wood-fronted building. The 25 higgledy-piggledy rooms are wedged in around the corridors: most are titchy, flowery and timber-beamed. Parking available.

#### Camping Municipal de l'île d'Or

CAMPGROUND €

(☎02 47 57 23 37; [www.camping-amboise.com](http://www.camping-amboise.com); Île d'Or; sites per adult/tent €2.50/3.50; ☎Apr-Sep; 🚶) Pleasant campground on a peaceful river island. Facilities include tennis courts, ping pong and canoe hire.

#### Centre Charles Péguy-Auberge de Jeunesse

HOSTEL €

(☎02 47 30 60 90; [www.mjcamboise.fr](http://www.mjcamboise.fr); Île d'Or; dm €12; ☎reception 2-8pm Mon-Fri, 5-8pm Sat & Sun; 🚶) Efficient boarding-school-style



hostel on the Île d'Or, with 72 beds mostly in three- or four-bed dorms. Treats include ping pong and bike hire.

**Le Manoir Les Minimes** DESIGN HOTEL €€€  
(02 47 30 40 40; www.manoirlesminimes.com; 34 quai Charles Guinot; d €122-195; ☼) Pricey pamper-palace set around a private courtyard that would put most châteaux to shame. Wheelchair access.

**Le Vieux Manoir** B&B €€€  
(02 47 30 41 27; www.le-vieux-manoir.com; 13 rue Rabelais; r incl breakfast €155-190; ☼) Mansion (run by expat Americans who had an award-winning Boston B&B) stuffed floor to ceiling with period charm.



## Eating & Drinking

**Chez Bruno** REGIONAL CUISINE €  
(02 47 57 73 49; place Michel Debré; menus from €12; ☼lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Tue-Sat) Uncork a host of local vintages in a coolly contemporary setting (white tablecloths, big gleaming glasses), accompanied by honest, inexpensive regional cooking. If you're after Loire Valley wine tips, this is the place.

**L'Épicerie** TRADITIONAL FRENCH €€  
(02 47 57 08 94; 46 place Michel Debré; menus €22-34; ☼Wed-Sun) A more time-honoured atmosphere with rich wood and neo-Renaissance decor matched by filling fare like *cuisse de lapin* (rabbit leg) and *tournedos de canard* (duck fillet).

**Bigot** TEA HOUSE €  
(02 47 57 59 32; 2 rue Nationale; ☼9am-7.30pm Tue-Fri, 8.30am-7.30pm Sat & Sun) Since 1913 this award-winning chocolatier and pâtisserie has been whipping up some of the Loire's creamiest cakes and gooiest treats: multicoloured *macarons*, handmade chocolates, éclairs and *petits fours*.

**Brasserie de L'Hôtel de Ville** BRASSERIE €€  
(02 47 57 26 30; 1-3 rue François 1er; lunch menus €9-10, dinner menus €16-25) Straight-up burgers and grills; to give the kids space to run, head to the back terrace in a quiet church square.

**Café des Arts** CAFÉ €  
(02 47 57 25 04; 32 rue Victor Hugo; meals €4-12) Locals' bar, steps from the château's gate. *Chanteurs* occasionally croon while you sip your aperitif.

## Self-Catering

**Food Market** MARKET €  
(☼8am-1pm Fri & Sun) Fills the riverbank west of the tourist office.

## Marché Plus

SUPERMARKET €

(5 quai du Général de Gaulle; ☼7am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun)

## Information

**Playconnect** (119 rue Nationale; per hr €3; ☼3-10pm Sun & Mon, 10am-10pm Tue-Sat) Internet access.

**Tourist Office** (02 47 57 09 28; www.amboise-valdeleire.com; ☼9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Sun) In a riverside building opposite 7 quai du Général de Gaulle. Sells walking and cycling maps and discount ticket combinations for the château, Clos Lucé and the Pagode de Chanteloup.

## Getting There & Around

Amboise is 34km southwest of Blois and 23km northeast of Tours.

**BICYCLE Cycles Richard** (02 47 57 01 79; 2 rue de Nazelles; per day €15; ☼9am-noon & 2.30-7pm Tue-Sat).

**BUS** Touraine Fil Vert's (p368) Line C links Amboise's post office with Tours' bus terminal (€1.70, 45 minutes, 12 daily Monday to Saturday). Two go to Chenonceau (€1.70, 15 minutes, Monday to Saturday).

**TRAIN** The **train station** (bd Gambetta) is across the river from the centre.

**Blois** €11, 20 minutes, 14 daily

**Paris Gare d'Austerlitz** €38 to €56, 2¼ hours, 14 daily

**Paris Gare Montparnasse** €107, 1¼ hours, 10 daily, TGV

**Tours** €11, 20 minutes, 10 daily

## Château de Villandry

Completed in 1756, one of the last major Renaissance châteaux to be built in the Loire Valley, **Villandry** (02 47 50 02 09; www.chateauvillandry.com; château & gardens adult/child €9/5, gardens only €6/3.50; ☼château 9am-6pm, to 5.30pm Mar, to 5pm Feb & early Nov, gardens 9am-5pm, to 7.30pm summer) is more famous for what lies outside the château's walls than what lies within. Sheltered with enclosing walls, the château's glorious **landscaped gardens** are some of the finest in France, occupying over 6 hectares filled with completely manicured lime trees, ornamental vines, razor-sharp box hedges and tinkling fountains.

The original gardens and château were built by Jean le Breton, who served François I as finance minister and Italian ambassador (and supervised the construction



of Chambord). During his time as ambassador, le Breton became enamoured by the art of Italian Renaissance gardening, and created his own ornamental masterpiece at his newly constructed château at Villandry.

Wandering around the pebbled walkways you'll see formal **water gardens**, a **maze**, **vineyards** and the **Jardin d'Ornement** (Ornamental Garden), which depicts various aspects of love (fickle, passionate, tender and tragic) using geometrically pruned hedges and coloured flowerbeds. The **Sun Garden** is a looser array of gorgeous multi-coloured and multiscented perennials. But the highlight is the 16th-century **potager** (kitchen garden), where even the vegetables are laid out in regimental colour-coordinated fashion; plantings change in spring and autumn.

Try to visit when the gardens are in bloom, between April and October; mid-summer is most spectacular.

After the gardens, the château's interior is a bit of a let-down compared with others in the region. Nevertheless, highlights include an over-the-top **oriental room**, complete with a gilded ceiling plundered from a 15th-century Moorish palace in Toledo, and a gallery of **Spanish and Flemish art**. Best of all are the bird's-eye views across the gardens and the nearby Loire and Cher rivers from the top of the **donjon** (the only remnant from the original medieval château) and the **belvedere**.

## Getting There & Away

Villandry is 17km southwest of Tours and 11km northeast of Azay-le-Rideau.

**BUS** Touraine Fil Vert's (p368) bus V travels between Tours and Azay-le-Rideau (€1.70, 50 minutes), stopping at Villandry (30 minutes from Tours), twice daily from June to August.

**TRAIN** The nearest trains stop in Savonnières, 4km northeast of Villandry, going to Tours (€11, 10 minutes, one daily) and Saumur (€11, 40 minutes, three daily).

## Château de Langeais

In contrast to the showy splendour of many châteaux, **Langeais** (☎02 47 96 72 60; adult/child €8.50/5; ☉9.30am-6.30pm, to 5.30pm Feb & Mar, 9am-7pm Jul & Aug) was constructed first and foremost as a fortress, built in the 1460s to cut off the likely invasion route from Brittany. It is fantas-

tically preserved inside and out, so it remains every inch the medieval stronghold: crenellated ramparts and defensive towers jut out from the jumbled rooftops of the surrounding village.

One of the few châteaux with its original medieval interior, the castle (reached via a creaky drawbridge), has 15th-century furniture throughout its flag-stoned rooms. Among many fine Flemish and Aubusson **tapestries** look out for one from 1530 depicting astrological signs; an intricate *Les Mille Fleurs*; and the famous *Les Neuf Preux* series portraying nine 'worthy' knights who represent the epitome of medieval courtly honour.

In one room, a waxwork display illustrates the marriage of Charles VIII and Anne of Brittany, which was held here on 6 December 1491 and brought about the historic union of France and Brittany.

Up top, stroll the castle's **ramparts** for a soldier's-eye view of the town: gaps underfoot enabled boiling oil, rocks and ordure to be dumped on attackers. Across the château's interior courtyard, climb to the top of the ruined **keep**, constructed by the 10th-century warlord, Count Foulques Nerra. Built in 944, it's the oldest such structure in France.

## Sleeping & Eating

The village of Langeais (population 4031), with its peaceful walking streets, is a fun pit stop in the midst of the mayhem of castle-hunting. The town's **market** bustles on Sunday mornings.

Reserve ahead to stay at **Anne de Bretagne** (☎02 47 96 08 52; www.chambresdhotels-langeais.fr, in French; 27 rue Anne de Bretagne; d incl breakfast €60-66) in a town house just down the street from the castle's drawbridge. You can dine at **Au Coin des Halles** (☎02 47 96 37 25; 9 rue Gambetta; lunch menus €15-18, dinner menus €21-49; ☉lunch Fri-Tue, dinner Thu-Tue) the village's elegant bistro, or grab a quick bite, across from the castle, at the sinfully decadent **La Maison de Rabalais** (☎02 47 96 82 20; ☉closed Mon Sep-Jun) with its rich pastries and potent coffees.

## Getting There & Away

Langeais is 14km west of Villandry and about 31km southwest of Tours. Its train station, 400m from the château, is on the line linking Tours (€11, 15 minutes, five daily) and Saumur (€11, 25 minutes).

## Château d'Azay-le-Rideau

Romantic, moat-ringed **Azay-le-Rideau** (☎02 47 45 42 04; adult/child €7.50/free; ☀9.30am–6pm, to 7pm Jul & Aug, 10am–12.30pm & 2–5.30pm Oct–Mar) is wonderfully adorned with slender turrets, geometric windows and decorative stonework, wrapped up within a shady landscaped park. Built in the 1500s on a natural island in middle of the River Indre, the château is one of the Loire's loveliest: Honoré de Balzac called it a 'multifaceted diamond set in the River Indre'.

Its most famous feature is its open **loggia staircase**, in the Italian style, overlooking the central courtyard and decorated with the salamanders and ermines of François I and Queen Claude. The interior is mostly 19th century, remodelled by the Marquis de Biencourt from the original 16th-century château built by Gilles Berthelot, chief treasurer for François I. In July and August, a **son et lumière** (one of the Loire's oldest and best) is projected onto the castle walls nightly. Multilanguage audioguides cost €4.50 and seven daily guided tours in French are free.

### **i** Getting There & Away

Château d'Azay-le-Rideau is 26km southwest of Tours. The D84 and D17, on either side of the Indre, are a delight to cycle.

**BUS** Touraine Fil Vert's (p368) bus V travels from Tours to Azay-le-Rideau (€1.70, 50 minutes) twice daily June to August. An SNCF bus stops near the château.

**TRAIN** The station is 2.5km from the château. Connections include Tours (€11, 20 to 50 minutes, six daily) and Chinon (€11, 20 minutes).

## Château d'Ussé

This main claim to fame of the elaborate **Château d'Ussé** (☎02 47 95 54 05; www.chateaudusse.fr; adult/child €13/4; ☀10am–7pm Apr–Aug, to 6pm Sep–mid-Nov & mid-Feb–Mar, closed mid-Nov–mid-Feb) is as the inspiration for Charles Perrault's classic fairy tale, *La Belle au Bois Dormant* (better known to English-speakers as *Sleeping Beauty*).

Ussé's creamy white towers and slate roofs jut out from the edge of the gloowering forest of Chinon, offering sweeping views across the flat Loire countryside and the flood-prone River Indre. The castle mainly dates from the 15th and 16th centuries, built on top of a much earlier 11th-century fortress. Its most notable features are the wonderful formal gardens designed by Le Nôtre, architect of Versailles. A popular local rumour claims Ussé was one of Walt Disney's inspirations when he dreamed up his magic kingdom (check out the Disney logo and you might agree).

You may be satisfied just looking at the château from outside, since refurbished rooms are starting to show their age; they include a series of dodgy wax models recounting the tale of *Sleeping Beauty*.

Ussé is on the edge of the small riverside village of Rigny-Ussé, about 14km north of Chinon. There is no public transport.

## Loches

POP 7076

The historic town of Loches spirals around the base of its medieval citadel, another forbidding stronghold begun by Foulques Nerra in the 10th century, and later enlarged by Charles VII. Loches earned a last-

### WORTH A TRIP

#### MUSÉE BALZAC

Meander down the Indre Valley along the tiny D84, passing mansions, villages and troglodyte caves, and 7km east of Azay-le-Rideau you come to sweet **Saché**. Once home to American sculptor Alexander Calder (one of his mobiles sits in the town square), it still celebrates the life of long-time inhabitant, Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850), author of *La Comédie Humaine*. The lovely **Musée Balzac** (☎02 47 26 86 50; www.musee-balzac.fr; adult/child €4.50/3; ☀10am–6pm Apr–Sep, closed lunchtime & Tue Oct–Mar) inhabits the town's château where Balzac was a habitual guest of his parents' friend, Jean Margonne. On a quiet slope in the lush river valley, the castle features original furnishings, manuscripts, letters and first editions. Feeling the peace, you can easily imagine Balzac escaping his hectic Parisian life and reclining here in his cosy bed, a board on his knees, writing for 12 hours a day – as he did.

ing footnote in the history books in 1429, when Joan of Arc persuaded Charles VII to march north from here to belatedly claim the French crown, but these days the town is a sleepy kind of place, best known for its lively Saturday morning market.

## Sights

From rue de la République, the old gateway **Porte Picois** leads through the cobbled Vieille Ville towards the **Porte Royale** (Royal Gate), flanked by two forbidding 13th-century towers, and the sole entrance to the **Cité Royale de Loches**, aka the citadel.

As you climb uphill you'll pass the **Maison Lansyer** (adult/child €3/2; ☺10am-noon & 2-6pm Wed-Mon), the former home of the landscape painter Emmanuel Lansyer (1838-93), featuring his paintings alongside works by Canaletto, Millet, Piranesi and Delacroix.

## **Logis Royal**

CASTLE

(☺02 47 59 01 32; www.chateau-loches.fr; adult/child €7/4.50; ☺9am-7pm Apr-Sep, 9.30am-5pm Oct-Mar) At the northern end of the citadel sits the royal residence of Charles VII and his successors, later used as a prison until the 1920s. The basement holds a circular chamber where the unfortunate Cardinal Baluc was supposedly kept suspended from the ceiling in a wooden cage for betraying Louis XI. In fact, it was more likely a grain store, although you can see a replica of the cardinal's actual cage elsewhere in the castle, as well as a chilling **Salle des Questions** (otherwise known as a torture chamber). Louis XI also constructed the notorious **Tour Ronde** (Round Tower) and **Tour Martelet** for incarcerating prisoners during the Revolution (read some of their graffiti etched on the walls).

At the southern end of the promontory is the 36m-high **donjon** built in the 11th century by Foulques Nerra. Though the interior floors have fallen away, dizzying catwalks allow you to climb right to the top for fantastic views across town.

## **Collegiale St-Ours**

CHURCH

This church contains the tomb of Agnès Sorel, Charles VII's mistress, who lived in the château during her illicit affair with the king. Notoriously beautiful and fiercely intelligent, Agnès earned many courtly enemies due to her powerful influence over Charles. Having borne three daughters, she died in mysterious circumstances while pregnant with their fourth child. The of-

ficial cause was dysentery, although some scientists have speculated that elevated levels of mercury in her body indicate she may have been poisoned.

## Sleeping & Eating

### **Le Moulin L'Étang**

HISTORIC HOTEL €€

(☺02 47 59 15 10; 1 rue du Moulin, Chauceaux-près-Loches; d €70-80, meals from €30; ☺) This lovingly converted mill, 3.2km west of Loches along the N143, has thick-beamed rooms peeking out through blue shutters onto a private millpond and a 2.8-hectare garden. Home-cooked food is made with local ingredients.

### **Hôtel de France**

HOTEL, RESTAURANT €

(☺02 47 59 00 32; www.hoteldefranceloches.com; 6 rue Picois; d €50-62, menus €18-50) An arched gateway leads into the paved courtyard of this old *relais de poste* (post house), now a trim if rather tired Logis de France. The best rooms are above the restaurant, which serves traditional French standbys.

### **Food Market**

MARKET €

(☺7am-3pm Wed, 7am-1pm Sat) Fills rue de la République and surrounding streets.

## Information

**Espace Public Numerique** (☺02 47 59 49 85; 24 av des Bas-Clos; per hr €2.15; ☺2-8pm Tue, Thu & Fri, 10am-1pm & 2-7pm Wed, 1-5.30pm Sat May-Sep) Internet access.

**Tourist office** (☺02 47 91 82 82; www.loches-tourainecotesud.com; place de la Marne; ☺9am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Mon-Sat, from 10am Sun, closed Sun Mar & Apr, Oct-Feb) Beside the river near the end of rue de la République.

## Getting There & Around

Loches is 67km southwest of Blois and 41km southeast of Tours. Trains and SNCF buses link the train station, across the River Indre from the tourist office, with Tours (€11, one hour, six daily).

## **Chinon**

POP 8663

Peacefully placed along the northern bank of the Vienne and dominated by its hulking hillside château, Chinon is best known as one of the Loire's main wine-producing areas. **Chinon AOC** (www.chinon.com) cabernet franc vineyards stretch along both sides of the river. Within the steep muddle of white

## MUSÉE RABELAIS

Follow the signs 9km southwest of Chinon, to the outskirts of Seuilly to find **La Devinière**, the farm where François Rabelais – doctor, Franciscan friar, theoretician and author – was born (sometime between 1483 and 1494; no one is sure). Set among the fields and vineyards with sweeping views to the private château in Coudray Montpensier, this farm inspired the settings for Rabelais' five satirical, erudite Gargantua and Pantagruel novels. The rambling buildings of the farmstead hold the **Musée Rabelais** (📍www.musee-rabelais.fr; adult/child €4.50/3; 🕒10am-12.30pm & 2-6pm Wed-Mon), with thoughtful exhibits including early editions of Rabelais' work and a Matisse portrait of the author from 1951. A winding cavern lurks beneath.

tufa houses and black slate rooftops you'll discover an interesting medieval quarter.



## Sights

## Forteresse Royale de Chinon

CASTLE

(📍02 47 93 13 45; www.forteresse-chinon.fr; adult/child €7/4.50; 🕒9am-7pm) In July 2010 the castle emerged from one of the region's largest restoration projects (at a cost of €14.5 million). It is split into three sections separated by dry moats. The 12th-century **Fort St-Georges** and the **Logis Royal** (Royal Lodgings) remain from the time when the Plantagenet court of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine was held here. The 14th-century **Tour de l'Horloge** (Clock Tower) houses a collection of Joan of Arc memorabilia; she came here in 1429 to meet the future Charles VII. There's a wonderful valley panorama from the top of the 13th-century **Fort du Coudray** and a small historical exhibition in the **Château du Milieu** (the Middle Castle).

Entry to the castle is across from the free lift ascending from the old town.

## Old Town

HISTORIC QUARTER

The author François Rabelais (c 1483–1553), whose works include the Gargantua and Pantagruel series grew up in Chinon; you'll see Rabelais-related names dotted all around the old town, which offers a fine cross-section of medieval architecture, best seen along **rue Haute St-Maurice** and **rue Voltaire**. Look out for the remarkable **Hôtel du Gouverneur** (rue Haute St-Maurice), an impressive town house with a double-flighted staircase ensconced behind a carved gateway, and the nearby Gothic **Palais du Bailliage**, the former residence of Chinon's bailiwick (now occupied by the Hostellerie Gargantua). The tourist office has a free walking-tour leaflet and offers **guided tours** (adult/child €4.70/2.50).

## Caves Painctes de Chinon

WINE CELLAR

(📍02 47 93 30 44; impasse des Caves Painctes; admission €3; 🕒guided tours 11am, 3pm, 4.30 & 6pm Tue-Sun) Hidden at the end of a cobbled alleyway off rue Voltaire, these former quarries were converted into wine cellars during the 15th century. The Confrérie des Bons Entonneurs Rabelaisiens, a brotherhood of local winegrowers, runs Tours of the *caves* in July and August.

## Musée d'Art et d'Histoire

MUSEUM

(44 rue Haute St-Maurice; adult/child €3.50/2; 🕒2-6pm Thu-Mon, closed mid-Nov-Feb) Art and archaeology exhibits from prehistory to the 19th century relating to Chinon and its environs.



## Sleeping



## Hôtel Diderot

HISTORIC HOTEL €

(📍02 47 93 18 87; www.hoteldiderot.com; 4 rue de Buffon; s €45-62, d €55-79; 📞) This gorgeous shady town house is tucked amid luscious rose-filled gardens and crammed with polished antiques. The friendly owners impart the kind of glowing charm you'd expect of a hotel twice the price. Rooms are all individually styled, from over-the-top Napoleonic to stripped-back art deco and have large flat-screen TVs. Parking €6.

## Hostellerie Gargantua

HISTORIC HOTEL €€

(📍02 47 93 04 71; www.hotel-gargantua.com; 73 rue Haute St-Maurice; s/d €53/79; 📞) Harry Potter would feel right at home at this turret-topped medieval mansion. The simple, offbeat hotel has spiral staircases, pitch-dark wood and solid stone. Superior rooms are worth the cash, including Grangousier with its fireplace and four-poster, and Badebec with its oak beams and château views. Parking €5.50.

**Hôtel Le Plantagenêt**

HOTEL €€

(☎02 47 93 36 92; [www.hotel-plantagenet.com](http://www.hotel-plantagenet.com); 12 place Jeanne d'Arc; s €58-70, d €65-80, tr €90; ☼☼) A basic, dated but perfectly serviceable hotel halfway between centre and station, with rooms spread over three buildings. The best is the *maison bourgeoise*. Some air-con. Parking €7.

**Eating & Drinking**

Reserve ahead on weekends and during high season.

**Les Années 30**

TRADITIONAL FRENCH €€

(☎02 47 93 37 18; 78 rue Voltaire; menus €27-43; ☼lunch Thu-Mon, dinner Thu-Tue) Expect the kind of meal you came to France to eat: exquisite attention to flavours and detail, served up in relaxed intimacy. The interior dining room is golden-lit downstairs and cool blue upstairs; in summer dine under the streetside pergola, in the heart of the old quarter. The menu ranges from traditional coq au vin and duck with cherry coulis to unusual choices such as wild boar.

**Restaurant au Chapeau Rouge**

TRADITIONAL FRENCH €€

(☎02 47 98 08 08; place du Général de Gaulle; lunch menus €19.50, dinner menus €27-50; ☼lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Tue-Sat) There's an air of a Left Bank brasserie hanging around the Red Hat, sheltered behind red and gold awnings. Chatting families dig into hare fondant, smoked fish and other countrified dishes.

**La Treille**

BISTRO €€

(☎02 47 93 07 71; 4 place Jeanne d'Arc; lunch menus from €16, mains €16; ☼lunch Thu-Tue, dinner Fri-Wed) Descend a couple of stairs into this tiny bistro rife with delicious smells. Specialties include monkfish à l'orange.

**Self-Catering****Food Market**

WEEKLY MARKET €

(place Jeanne d'Arc; ☼Thu morning)

**Carrefour**

SUPERMARKET €

(22 place du Général de Gaulle; ☼7am-10pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun)

**Information**

**Tourist Office** (☎02 47 93 17 85; place Hofheim; ☼10am-7pm)

**Getting There & Away**

Chinon is 47km southwest of Tours and 21km southwest of Azay-le-Rideau.

**BUS** Touraine Fil Vert's bus (p368) **TF** (€1.70) connects Chinon, Azay-le-Rideau and Langeais (one to four Monday to Friday).

**TRAIN** The train station is 1km east of place du Général de Gaulle. Trains or SNCF buses (12 daily, six on weekends) go to Tours (€11, 45 to 70 minutes) and Azay-le-Rideau (€11, 25 minutes).

**ANJOU**

In Anjou, Renaissance châteaux give way to chalky white tufa cliffs concealing an astonishing underworld of wine cellars, mushroom farms and art sculptures. Above ground, black slate roofs pepper the vine-rich land from which some of the Loire's best wines are produced.

Angers, the historic capital of Anjou, is famous for its fortified hilltop château and its stunning medieval tapestry. Architectural gems in Anjou's crown include Angers cathedral and, to the southeast, the Romanesque Abbaye de Fontevraud. Europe's highest concentration of troglodyte dwellings dot the banks of the Loire around cosmopolitan Saumur.

The area along the Rivers Loire, Authion and Vienne from Angers southeast to Azay-le-Rideau form the Parc Naturel Régional Loire-Anjou-Touraine.

**Saumur**

POP 29,587

There's an air of Parisian sophistication around Saumur, but also a sense of laid-back contentment. The food is good, the wine is good, the spot is good – and the Saumurites know it. The town is renowned for its École Nationale d'Équitation, a national cavalry school that's been home to the crack riders of the Cadre Noir since 1828. Soft white tufa cliffs stretch along the riverbanks east and west of town, pock-marked by the unusual man-made caves known as *habitations troglodytes*.

**Sights & Activities**

**Base de Loisirs Millocheau** (☎02 41 50 62 72; [www.canoe.saumur.free.fr](http://www.canoe.saumur.free.fr)) rents canoes and kayaks by reservation.

**École Nationale d'Équitation**

RIDING SCHOOL

(National Equestrian School; ☎02 41 53 50 60; [www.cadrenoir.fr](http://www.cadrenoir.fr); rte de Marson; adult/child

€7/5) Anchored in France's academic-military riding tradition, Saumur has been an equine centre since 1593. Three kilometres west of town, outside of sleepy St-Hilaire-St-Florent, the École Nationale d'Équitation is one of France's foremost riding academies, responsible for training the country's Olympic teams and members of the elite Cadre Noir, distinguished by their special black jackets, caps, gold spurs and three golden wings on their whips. The Cadre Noir train both the school's instructors and horses (which take around 5½ years to achieve display standard) and are famous for their astonishing discipline and acrobatic manoeuvres (like 'airs above ground'), which are all performed without stirrups.

Advance reservations are essential for the one-hour guided visits (four to 10 per day; enquire about the availability of English-language tours). If you happen to be in town for one of the semi-monthly **Cadre Noir presentations** (adult/child €16/9) do not miss it: they are like astonishing horse ballets. Check the website for dates.

### Le Château de Saumur

CASTLE

(☎02 41 40 24 40; adult/child €3/2.50; ☉10am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct) Lording above the town's rooftops, Saumur's fairytale château was largely built during the 13th century by Louis XI, and has variously served as a dungeon, fortress and country residence, but its defensive heritage took

a hefty knock in 2001 when a large chunk of the western ramparts collapsed without warning, triggering an enormous restoration project that has already lasted 10 years and still shows no sign of completion. Two halls are open with exhibits on equitation and pottery and you can wander the grounds outside.

### Musée des Blindés

MILITARY MUSEUM

(☎02 41 83 69 95; [www.museedesblindes.fr](http://www.museedesblindes.fr), in French; 1043 rte de Fontevraud; adult/child €7/4; ☉10am-6pm) Want to see more than equine military history? Gearheads love this comprehensive museum of over 200 tanks and military vehicles. Children are allowed to climb on some of them. Examples include many WWI tanks such as the Schneider and dozens of WWII models, such as the Hotchkiss H39, Panzers and an Issoise infantry tractor.

### Distillerie Combier

DISTILLERY

(☎02 41 40 23 00; [www.combier.fr](http://www.combier.fr); 48 rue Beaurepaire; adult €3; ☉3-4 guided visits per day, 10am-12.30pm & 2-7pm, closed Mon Oct-May, Sun Nov & Jan-Mar) Though it's existed for 175 years, it is only recently that this distillery has resurrected authentic absinthe (see p388), the famous firewater. Taste it alongside other liqueurs including Royal Combier, Triple Sec and Pastis d'Antan.

**FREE** **Musée de la Cavalerie** CAVALRY MUSEUM  
(☎02 41 83 69 23; <http://museecavalerie.free.fr>, in French; place Charles de Fou-

## LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

### STÉPHANE MICHON: CURATOR OF THE MUSHROOM MUSEUM

There are more than 1500km of subterranean caves around Saumur (see also p384), which provide the perfect environment for cultivating mushrooms: a constant year-round temperature (of 13°C to 14°C) and very high humidity (more than 90%). Thanks to Saumur's equestrian connections, we also have ready access to plenty of top-quality fertiliser for our mushroom crops! The caves keep us sheltered from the rain, but they can be quite chilly and damp to work in. I've also nearly lost myself on several occasions – hardly surprising really, since there are dozens of kilometres of caves around Saumur, and no maps!

#### Varieties

In addition to the *champignon de Paris* (button mushroom), some of our other famous fungi include the *pie'd bleu* (blue foot), the shiitake and the *pleurote* (oyster mushroom).

#### How to Eat Them

For me, the best way to eat them is simply either fried with parsley and oil, or in the local speciality, *Galipette*: a large *champignon de Paris*, grilled and then stuffed with goat's cheese, parsley butter or *rillettes*.



cauld; ☉9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Thu, 2-6pm Sat-Sun) Housed in the old military stables of the Cadre Noir, this museum traces the history of the French cavalry from 1445 in the time of Charles VII to modern tanks.

### Langlois – Chateau

WINE SCHOOL

(☎02 41 40 21 40; www.langlois-chateau.fr; 3 rue Léopold Palustre, St-Hilaire-St-Florent; classes adult/child €2/free, extended classes €225; ☉10am-12.30pm & 2-6pm) Founded in 1912 and specialising in Crémant de Loire sparkling wines, this domaine is open for tours, tasting and a visit to the caves and offers an introduction to winemaking at its wine school. See p350 for more on Loire Valley wines.



### Tours

#### Boat Trip

RIVER TOUR

(☎06 63 22 87 00; www.bateaux-nantais.fr, in French; adult/child €9/4.50; ☉2.30-4pm Jun-Sep) The *Saumur-Loire* leaves from across from the town hall on 1¼-hour cruises. Also see p361.

#### Carriage Rides

CARRIAGE TOUR

(adult/child €7/4; ☉2-5pm Sat-Thu) Depart from place de la République. Also operate on Fridays in July and August.



### Sleeping

Saumur's accommodation is of a high calibre. Reserve ahead.



### Château de Verrières

CASTLE HOTEL €€€

(☎02 41 38 05 15; www.chateau-verrieres.com; 53 rue d'Alsace; r €150-210, ste €260-290; ☉☉) Every one of the 10 rooms in this impeccably wonderful 1890 château, ensconced within the woods and ponds of a 1.6-hectare English park, is different. But the feel is universally plush and kingly: antique writing desks, original artwork, wood panelling and fantastic bathrooms. Some, like the top-of-the-line Rising Sun suite (with a dash of modish Japanese minimalism), have views of the sun rising over the Saumur château. Regal with a capital R. Parking free.

### Château Beaulieu

CASTLE B&B €€

(☎02 41 50 83 52; www.chateaubeauleu.fr; 98 rte de Montsoreau; d incl breakfast €80-120, ste €140-200; ☉☉) Irish expats Mary and Conor welcome you to their sprawling home with a glass of bubbling *crémant*. Rooms are imaginatively and comfortably done up

and the mood among the generally gregarious clientele is one of extended family. Sun yourself by the pool or play billiards in the grand salon. Parking free.

### Hôtel Saint-Pierre

HISTORIC HOTEL €€

(☎02 41 50 33 00; www.saintpierresaumur.com; 8 rue Haute St-Pierre; r €70-155; ☉☉) Squeezed down a miniscule alleyway opposite the cathedral, this effortlessly smart hideaway mixes heritage architecture with modern-day comfort: pale stone, thick rugs and vintage lamps sit happily alongside minibars and satellite TV. Tiled mosaics line the bathrooms and black-and-white dressage photos enliven the lobby.

### Hôtel de Londres

HOTEL €

(☎02 41 51 23 98; www.lelondres.com; 48 rue d'Orléans; s €40-45, d €48-70; ☉☉) Snag one of the refurbished rooms in jolly checks, crisp blues and sunshine yellows, all with gleaming bathrooms and thoughtful spoils including afternoon tea and a well-stocked comic library. Parking €4.

### Camping l'île d'Offard

CAMPGROUND €

(☎02 41 40 30 00; www.cvtloisirs.com; rue de Verden; sites for 2 people €16-27; ☉Mar-Sep; ☉☉) Well-equipped and very pretty campground on a natural river island, about 1.5km from town.



### Eating

Saumur is one of the culinary centres of the Loire; book ahead.



### Le Pot de Lapin

MODERN FRENCH €€

(☎02 41 67 12 86; 35 rue Rabelais; tapas €1.50-5, mains €11-19; ☉Tue-Sat) The jaunty strains of Django Reinhardt's guitar waft from the cheery dining room through the wine bar and onto the streetside terrace. Chef Olivier serves the tables himself, proposing perfect wine pairings, and the food – well, the food is decadent. Spanish meets French in a perfectly seasoned shrimp brochette, and you'll feel sinful but unrepentant if you order the coulis-drizzled foie gras. Somehow the vibe here is, simply put, happiness – happy staff, happy clients.

### Le Gambetta

GASTRONOMIC €€

(☎02 41 67 66 66; www.restaurantlegambetta.com, in French; 12 rue Gambetta; lunch menus €20-27, other menus €27-82; ☉lunch Thu-Tue, dinner Mon-Tue & Thu-Sat) OK, prepare yourself. This is another place to write home about: a fantastic regional restaurant combining

## TROGLODYTE VALLEY

For centuries the creamy white tufa cliffs around Saumur have been a key source of local building materials; in fact, many of the Loire's grandest châteaux were constructed from this soft stone. The rocky bluffs also provided shelter and storage for the local inhabitants, leading to the development of a unique *culture troglodyte* (cave culture), as in the Vézère Valley in the Dordogne. The cool, dank caves were developed into proper houses (*habitations troglodytes*) and perfect natural cellars for everyone from vintners to mushroom farmers (p384). Eat your heart out, Bilbo Baggins!

Find caves lining the Loire east and west of Saumur and radiating from the village of Doué-la-Fontaine; bring a sweater as they remain cool (13°C) year-round.

**Rochemenier** (☎02 41 59 18 15; www.troglodyte.info; adult/child €5/2.60; ☉9.30am-7pm Apr-Oct, 2-6pm Sat-Sun Nov, Feb & Mar) Inhabited right up until the 1930s, this abandoned village, 6km north of Doué-la-Fontaine, is one of the best examples of troglodytic culture. Also explore the remains of two farmsteads (complete with houses, stables and an underground chapel).

**Les Perrières** (☎02 41 59 71 29; www.ville-douelafontaine.fr/perrieres, in French; Doué-la-Fontaine; adult/child €4.50/3; ☉2-6.30pm Tue-Sun, closed Oct-May) Former stone quarries sometimes called the 'cathedral caves' due to their lofty caverns.

**Les Maisons Troglodytes** (☎02 41 59 00 32; adult/child €5.50/3; ☉9.30am-7pm, closed Nov-Feb) More hobbit-style houses where the only external traces of the underground dwellings are the chimneys poking up from the ground. In Forges, 4km northeast of Doué-la-Fontaine.

**Troglodytes et Sarcophages** (☎06 77 77 06 94; www.troglodytes-sarcophages.fr; Doué-la-Fontaine; adult/child €4.50/3; ☉2.30-7pm Jun-Aug, Sat-Sun May) A merovingian mine where sarcophagi were produced from the 6th to the 9th centuries. Atmospheric lantern-lit tours (adult/child €7.50/5.50) are conducted on Tuesday and Friday at 8.30pm in July and August, by reservation.

**Troglodytes et Pommes Tapées** (☎02 41 51 48 30; www.letroglodytespommesapees.fr; 11 rue des Ducs d'Anjou, Turquant; adult/child €5.50/3.50; ☉10am-12.30pm & 2-6.30pm Wed-Sun, closed mid-Nov-mid-Feb) One of the last places in France to produce the traditional dried apples known as *pommes tapées*. Visit and taste 10km southeast of Saumur.

You'll also find some fantastical pieces of artwork sprinkled around the valley:

**Hélice Terrestre de l'Orbière** (☎02 41 57 95 92; adult/child €4/2; ☉11am-8pm) Startling piece of rock art sculpted by local artist Jacques Warminski (1946-96). In St-Georges-des-Sept-Voies, 23km northwest of Saumur.

**La Cave aux Sculptures** (☎02 41 59 15 40; Dénézé-sous-Doué; adult/child €4/2.50; ☉10.30am-1pm & 2-6.30pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct) Full of leering faces, contorted figures and bestial gargoyles carved sometime between the 16th and 17th century. Six kilometres north of Doué-la-Fontaine.

refined elegance and knock-your-socks-off creative food. The parade of exquisitely presented dishes ranges from roast pork loin in a demi-glace with a strip of perfect polenta to surprisingly delicious wasabi *crème brûlée*. Some menus have bespoke wine pairings (from €25.50) and all are punctuated by surprise treats from the kitchen.

**L'Alchimiste** MODERN FRENCH €€  
(☎02 41 67 65 18; 6 rue de Lorraine; menus €15-18; ☉lunch Thu-Tue, dinner Mon-Tue & Thu-Sat)

Simple, clean flavours are the hallmark of this sleek bistro. As a result, the flavours of the fresh ingredients sing out: from tomato gazpacho to fresh fish.

**L'Amuse Bouche** TRADITIONAL FRENCH €€  
(☎02 41 67 79 63; 512 rte Montsoreau, Dampierre-sur-Loire; lunch menus €10, dinner menus €21-58; ☉lunch Thu-Tue, dinner Mon & Thu-Sat)

Tuck into delicious, fresh meals prepared with creativity, like *chèvre* with a hint of honey where you don't expect it. The crim-

son and silver dining room with colourful oil paintings manages to be both cheery and homey and the outside terrace is great in summer. Kids' menu €10.

## i Information

**Tourist office** (☎02 41 40 20 60; [www.sauzur-tourisme.com](http://www.sauzur-tourisme.com); place de la Bilange; ☎9.15am-12.30pm & 2-6pm)

## i Getting There & Around

**BICYCLE Détours de Loire** (☎02 41 53 01 01; 1 rue David d'Angers; ☎9am-12.30pm & 4.30-6.30pm) rents bikes.

**BUS** See p387 for buses from Angers. **Agglobus** (☎02 41 51 11 87; [www.agglobus.fr](http://www.agglobus.fr), in French) runs local buses (tickets €1.35).

**TRAIN** Services connect Tours (€15 to €23, 50 minutes, 15 daily) and Angers (€11 to €19, 25 minutes, nine daily).

## East of Saumur

The tufa bluffs east of Saumur are home to some of the area's main wine producers: you'll see notable vineyards and vintners ([www.producteurs-de-sauzur-champigny.fr](http://www.producteurs-de-sauzur-champigny.fr), in French) along the riverside D947, most offering free tasting sessions from around 10am to 6pm from spring to autumn. For example, you'll pass **Le Grande Vignolle** (☎02 41 38 16 44; [www.filiatreau.com](http://www.filiatreau.com); Turquant), a domaine and tasting room in grand tufa caves.

Other sights include mushroom caves (p384).

## MONTMOREAU & CANDES-ST-MARTIN

**Château de Montsoreau** (☎02 41 67 12 60; adult/child €8.50/5.40; ☎10am-7pm, closed mid-Nov-Feb; 🏰), beautifully situated on the edge of the Loire, houses a dynamic museum exploring the castle's history and the river trade that once sustained the Loire Valley (expect sound, lights and drama). Staff provide a treasure hunt for kids. The castle itself, blessed with great views, was built in 1455 by one of Charles VII's advisers, and later became famous thanks to an Alexandre Dumas novel, *La Dame de Montsoreau*.

**Maison du Parc** (☎02 41 38 38 88; [www.parc-loire-anjou-touraine.fr](http://www.parc-loire-anjou-touraine.fr); 15 av de la Loire, Montsoreau; ☎9.30am-7pm) for the Parc Naturel Régional Loire-Anjou-Touraine is a clearinghouse of information on the 2530-sq-km regional park whose mission is

to protect both the landscape and the area's extraordinary architectural patrimony.

The nearby village of **Candes-St-Martin** occupies an idyllic spot at the confluence of the Vienne and the Loire. The 9th- to 15th-century **church** venerates the spot where St Martin died and was buried in 397 (though his body was later moved to Tours). Candes eventually became a major pilgrimage point and thus bears his name.

Climb the tiny streets and you'll come to inhabited cave dwellings and a view over the rivers. **La Brocante Gourmand** (20 rue Trochet; sandwich €3; ☎10.30am-8.30pm Tue-Sun), a teahouse and used-book shop, makes for a pastoral, unique hilltop pit stop.

See p361 for boat cruises.

## FORTEVRAUD-L'ABBAYE Abbaye Royale de Fontevraud

HISTORIC ABBEY

(☎02 41 51 71 41; [www.abbaye-fontevraud.com](http://www.abbaye-fontevraud.com); adult/child €8.50/7, tour or audioguide €4; ☎9.30am-6.30pm) Until its closure in 1793 this huge 12th-century complex was one of the largest ecclesiastical centres in Europe. Unusually, both nuns and monks were governed by an abbess (generally a lady of noble birth retiring from public life). The extensive grounds include a **chapter room** with murals of the Passion of Christ by Thomas Pot, dormitories, workrooms and prayer halls, as well as a spooky underground sewer system and a wonderful barrel-vaulted **refectory**, where the monks and nuns would eat in silence while being read the scriptures.

Look out, too, for the multichimneyed, rocket-shaped **kitchen**, built entirely from stone to make it fireproof.

The highlight is undoubtedly the massive, movingly simple **abbey church**, notable for its soaring pillars, Romanesque domes and the polychrome tombs of four illustrious Plantagenets: Henry II, King of England (r 1154-89); his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine (who retired to Fontevraud following Henry's death); their son Richard the Lionheart; and his wife Isabelle of Angoulême.

After the Revolution, the buildings became a prison, in use until 1963. Author Jean Gênet was imprisoned at Fontevraud for stealing, and later wrote *Miracle de la Rose* (1946) based on his experiences.

## MUSHROOM MADNESS

Mushroom lovers – or those willing to be seduced by the charms of *champignons* – can learn more, tour caves and taste samples in the Saumur area.

**Musée du Champignon** (Mushroom Museum; ☎02 41 50 31 55; [www.musee-du-champignon.com](http://www.musee-du-champignon.com); rte de Gennes; adult/child €7/4.50; ☉10am-7pm Feb–mid-Nov) Get acquainted with the fabulous fungus at the museum tucked into a cave at the western edge of St-Hilaire-St-Florent.

**La Cave aux Moines** (☎02 41 67 95 64; [www.cave-aux-moines.com](http://www.cave-aux-moines.com); Chênehutte-Trèves-Cunault; menus €20-23; ☉lunch Sat-Sun, dinner Fri-Sun) Besides tours of the cave (adult/child €4.50/3), there's a restaurant with all manner of mushrooms, snails and *fouées*, the local fire-baked breads. Kids' menu €8. It's 9km northwest of Saumur.

**Le Saut aux Loups** (☎02 41 51 70 30; [www.troglo-sautauxloups.com](http://www.troglo-sautauxloups.com); Montsoreau; plates €9-15; ☉lunch Wed-Mon, dinner Fri-Sat) Another chance to explore caves (adult/child €5.90/4.50) and tuck into fresh fungi, 12km southeast of Saumur.

### Chez Teresa

B&B, TEAROOM €

(☎02 41 51 21 24; [www.chezteresa.fr](http://www.chezteresa.fr); 6 av Rochechouart; d incl breakfast €49-55, menus €12-15) Keeping up Fontevraud's English connections, this frilly little teashop is run by an expat Englishwoman with a passion for traditional teatime fare: tea for two with sandwiches, scones and cakes is just €8.50, and there are cute upstairs rooms if you fancy staying overnight.

### Hôtel Abbaye Royale de Fontevraud

HOTEL, RESTAURANT €€

(☎02 41 51 73 16; [www.hotelfp-fontevraud.com](http://www.hotelfp-fontevraud.com); r €78-122, menus €27-40; ☉lunch Sun, dinner nightly, closed Nov-Mar; 🍷) The gastronomic restaurant in the old infirmary at the abbey serves seriously *haute cuisine* (pigeon, duck, lobster, foie gras). Rooms are a bit corporate in comparison to the stellar food, but comfy nonetheless.

## Angers

POP 155,700

Often dubbed 'Black Angers' due to the local dark slate used for its roofs, the lively riverside city is famous for its tapestries: the 14th-century *Tenture de l'Apocalypse* in the city's château and the 20th-century *Chant du Monde* at the Jean Lurçat museum. A bustling old town, with many pedestrianised streets and a thriving café culture, makes it a fun eastern gateway to the Loire Valley.



### Sights & Activities

A small **tourist train** (☎02 41 23 50 00; adult/child €6/4; ☉daily May-Sep, weekends Easter-

Apr), departing from the château, makes a circuit through the city's highlights.



### Château d'Angers

CASTLE

(☎02 41 86 48 77; 2 promenade du Bout du Monde; adult/child €8/free; ☉9.30am-6.30pm) This impressive black-stone château, formerly the seat of power for the counts of Anjou, looms behind quai de Ligny, ringed by battlements and 17 watchtowers. Unexpectedly, the flower-filled interior is rather cheerful. The star of the show is the stunning **Tenture de l'Apocalypse** (Apocalypse tapestry), a 104m-long series of tapestries commissioned by Louis I, Duke of Anjou around 1375 to illustrate the Book of Revelation. It dramatically recounts the story of the Day of Judgment from start to finish, complete with the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, the Battle of Armageddon and the coming of the Beast: look out for graphic depictions of St Michael battling a seven-headed dragon and the fall of Babylon. Audioguides (€4.50) provide useful context, and guided tours are free. That black stone? It's actually called blue schist.

### Musée Jean Lurçat et de la Tapisserie Contemporaine

TAPESTRY MUSEUM

(☎02 41 05 38 00; 4 bd Arago; adult/child €4/free; ☉10am-7pm) Providing an interesting counterpoint to Angers' other famous piece of needlework, this museum collects major 20th-century tapestries by Jean Lurçat, Thomas Gleb and others inside the Hôpital St-Jean, a 12th-century hospital founded by Henry Plantagenet. The centrepiece is the *Chant du Monde* (Song of the World), an amazing series depicting the trials and triumphs of modern humanity, from nuclear

holocaust and space exploration to the delights of drinking Champagne. Odd and unmissable.

**Galerie David d'Angers** SCULPTURE MUSEUM (☎02 41 05 38 90; 33bis rue Toussaint; adult/child €4/free; ☼10am-7pm) Angers' most famous son is the sculptor Pierre-Jean David (1788-1856), often just known as David d'Angers. Renowned for lifelike busts and sculptures, his work adorns public monuments all over France, notably at the Panthéon, the Louvre and Père Lachaise cemetery (where he carved many tombstones, including Honoré de Balzac's). His work

forms the cornerstone of this museum, housed in the converted 12th-century Toussaint Abbey and flooded with light through a striking glass-and-girder ceiling.

**Musée des Beaux-Arts** ART MUSEUM (☎02 41 05 38 00; 14 rue du Musée; adult/child €4/free; ☼10am-7pm) The buildings of the sprawling, fantastic fine-arts museum mix plate glass with the fine lines of the typical Angevin aristocratic house. The museum has a section on the history of Angers and an superior 17th- to 20th-century collection: Monet, Ingres, Lorenzo Lippi and Flemish masters including Rogier van der Weyden.

## Angers





## Angers

### Top Sights

|                              |    |
|------------------------------|----|
| Chateau d'Angers .....       | B5 |
| Galerie David d'Angers ..... | C5 |
| Musée des Beaux-Arts .....   | C5 |

### Sights

- 1 Cathédrale St-Maurice.....C4
- 2 Entrance to Cathédrale  
St-Maurice.....C4
- 3 Entrance to Château d'Angers.....B4
- 4 Maison d'Adam.....D4
- 5 Maison du Vin de l'Anjou.....B4

### Sleeping

- 6 Hôtel Continental.....D4

### Eating

- 7 Chez Toi.....D3
- 8 Le Favre d'Anne.....A3
- 9 Monoprix Supermarket.....D3
- 10 Villa Toussaint.....C5

### Drinking

- 11 Le Kifé du Jour.....D3

### Entertainment

- 12 Les Quatre-Cents Coups.....D3

## Quartier de la Cité

HISTORIC QUARTER

In the heart of the old city, **Cathédrale St-Maurice** (☉8.30am-7pm) is one of the earliest examples of Plantagenet or Angevin architecture in France, distinguished by its rounded ribbed vaulting, 15th-century stained glass and a 12th-century portal depicting the Day of Judgment. Across the square from the cathedral on place Ste-Croix is the **Maison d'Adam** (c 1500), one of the city's best-preserved medieval houses, decorated with a riot of carved, bawdy figurines. From the square in front of the cathedral a monumental staircase, the **Montée St-Maurice**, leads down to the river.

## Maison du Vin de l'Anjou

WINE CENTRE

(☎02 41 88 81 13; mdesvins-angers@vinsvalde-loire.fr; 5bis place du Président Kennedy; ☉10am-1pm & 2.30-6.30pm Tue-Sat, 10.30am-1pm Sun, closed mid-Jan-mid-Feb) Head here for the lowdown on local Anjou and Loire vintages: tasting, sales, tours and tips on where to buy wines.

## Sleeping

### Hôtel du Mail

HISTORIC HOTEL €€

(☎02 41 25 05 25; www.hotel-du-mail.com; 8 rue des Ursules; d €65-80; ☉) Situated in a con-

verted convent around a quiet courtyard, rooms here have a light, airy feel, even if they are a bit worn. The funky lobby, huge buffet breakfast (€10), friendly staff and thoughtful touches (daily newspapers, free umbrellas) make this a peaceful Angers base. Parking €6. Find it just east of the Quartier de la Cité, near the Hôtel de Ville.



## Hôtel Continental

HOTEL €€

(☎02 41 86 94 94; www.hotelcontinental.com; 14 rue Louis de Romain; s €51-90, d €60-93; ☉☉) Wedged into a wafer-shaped building in the city centre, this green-certified, metro-style hotel has 25 rooms decked out in cosy checks and sunny colours, plus a good downstairs café, Le Green. Street noise is a drawback.

## Hôtel Le Progrès

HOTEL €

(☎02 41 88 10 14; www.hotelprogres.com; 26 rue Denis Papin; s €45-63, d €59-73; ☉) It's nothing fancy, but this reliable station hotel is solid, friendly and squeaky clean. Parking €5.

## Mercure

DESIGN HOTEL €€

(☎02 41 87 37 20; www.mercure.com; 18 bd du Maréchal Foch; s €125-150, d €135-160; ☉☉) Clean lines, minimalist decor, business-type styling and wall-mounted LCD TVs adorn Angers' sharpest rooms, though the look occasionally borders on the spartan. Disabled accessible. Mercure is three blocks southeast of the Grand Théâtre d'Angers.



## Eating

### Le Favre d'Anne

GASTRONOMIC €€€

(☎02 41 36 12 12; www.lefavredanne.fr, in French; 18 quai des Carmes; lunch menus €20-28, dinner menus €55-90; ☉Tue-Sat) Muted tones, crystal, linen and river views call for a romantic night out or a swanky lunch. Ingredients are always fresh (artichokes, asparagus, goat cheese, local fish) and the concoctions creative: a dash of cacao here and a splash of prune coulis there. No wonder it has a Michelin star.



## ANGERS CITY PASS

Swing by the tourist office to buy the **Angers City Pass** (24/48/72 hours €12/19/24), good for entry to the château, museums, the tourist train and other sights, as well as for transport discounts.

## Villa Toussaint

FRENCH FUSION €€

(☎02 41 88 15 64; 43 rue Toussaint; mains €16-18; ☺Tue-Sat) With its chic dining room and decked patio, you know you're in for a treat at this fusion place, combining pan-Asian flavours with classic French ingredients. The *combinaisons* bring together several dishes on one plate, from sushi to Thai chicken and tapas. Reserve ahead.

## Chez Toi

BISTRO €€

(☎02 41 87 85 58; 44 rue St-Laud; mains €13-17; ☺9am-1.30am; ☎☎) Minimalist furniture and technicolour trappings meet head-to-head in this zippy little lounge-bar, much favoured by the trendy Angevin set. All the dishes are named after friends to emphasise the chummy vibe, and the terrace is great for people-watching on a sunny day.

## Self-Catering

### Food Market

WEEKLY MARKET €

(place Louis Imbach & place Leclerc; ☺Sat morning)

### Monoprix

SUPERMARKET €

(☺8.30am-9pm Mon-Sat) Across from 59 rue Plantagenêt. Has a food hall.



## Drinking & Entertainment

The free *Angers Poche* details local events. Get tickets at **Fnac billetterie** (☎08 92 68 36 22; 25-29 rue Lenepveu; ☺10am-7pm Mon-Sat).

### Le Kifé du Jour

WINE BAR

(☎02 41 86 80 70; rue St-Laud) Laid-back little wine bar with lots of local wines by the glass or *pichet* (jug; €3).

### L'Autrement

MUSIC CLUB

(☎02 41 87 61 95; www.lautrementcafe.com, in French; 90 rue Lionnaise; ☺Wed-Sat) Jazz troupes, roots bands and local acts grace the stage at Angers' smoothest venue, about 100m west of Abbaye du Ronceray.

### Les Quatre-Cents Coups

CINEMA

(☎02 41 88 70 95; www.les400coups.org; 12 rue Claveau) Arts cinema showing nondubbed films.



## Information

**Cyber Espace** (25 rue de la Roë; per hr €3; ☺10am-9pm Mon-Thu, 10am-10pm Fri-Sat, 2-6pm Sun) Internet access.

**Post office** (1 rue Franklin Roosevelt) Exchanges currency.

**Tourist office** (☎02 41 23 50 00; www.angers-loiretourisme.com; 7 place du Président Kennedy; ☺10am-7pm Mon, 9am-7pm Tue-Sat, 10am-6pm Sun)

## Getting There & Away

Angers is 107km west of Tours and 90km east of Nantes.

**AIR** At the time of research, **Angers-Marcé Airport** (☎02 41 33 50 00; www.angers.aeroport.fr) had no commercial flights.

**BUS Anjou Bus** (☎08 20 16 00 49; www.anjoubus.fr, in French) is at the train station.

**Brissac-Quincé** Bus 9, €4.10, 25 minutes, six daily Monday to Saturday

**Doué-La-Fontaine** Bus 9, €7.60, one hour

**Saumur** Buses 5 and 11, €9, 1½ hours, seven daily Monday to Saturday

**TRAIN** In the centre buy tickets at **Boutique SNCF** (5 rue Chaperonnière; ☺1.30-7pm Mon, 9.30am-7pm Tue-Fri, 9.30am-6.30pm Sat). From Gare Angers-St-Laud:

**Paris Gare Montparnasse** €46 to €92, 1¾ hours, hourly

**Saumur** €11 to €16, 30 minutes, 14 daily

**Tours** €16, one hour, 13 daily



## Getting Around

At the time of research, work was still continuing on Angers' tram system.

**BICYCLE** The tourist office rents bikes (half-/full day €9/14) as part of the Détours de Loire network (p357).

**BUS** Local buses are run by **Keolis Angers** (☎02 41 33 64 64; www.cotra.fr; single/day ticket €1.30/3.50).

**CAR** Major car-rental companies (including Avis, Hertz, Europcar and National) have desks inside the train station.

**TAXI** Call ☎02 41 87 65 00, 02 41 34 96 52.

## 24 HOURS OF LE MANS

Every second week of June, race car aficionados converge on **Le Mans** (population 148,340) to watch this careening, 24-hour endurance race. Corvettes, Porsches, Ferraris and myriad other souped-up speedsters whip around the 13.629km Circuit de la Sarthe track at the world's oldest sports-car race (www.lemans.org), first run in 1923. The rest of the year, visit the **museum** (☎33 2 43 72 72 24; www.lemusee24h.com), which houses over 150 vehicles from an 1885 De Dion Bouton et Trepardoux steam-driven dog cart to past winners that are just a bit speedier.

## ORANGE PEEL & ANISEED LIQUEURS

Some of France's most distinctive liqueurs are distilled in the Loire Valley, including bitter orange Cointreau and the aniseedy (and allegedly hallucinogenic) brew known as absinthe.

**Cointreau** has its origins in the experiments of two enterprising brothers: Adolphe Cointreau, a sweet-maker, and his brother Édouard-Jean Cointreau, who founded a factory in Angers in 1849 to produce fruit-flavoured liqueurs. In 1875 Édouard-Jean's son (also called Édouard) hit upon the winning concoction of sweet and bitter oranges, flavoured with intensely orange peel. The liqueur was a massive success; by the early 1900s over 800,000 bottles of Cointreau were being produced to the top-secret recipe, and a century later every one of the 13 million bottles is still distilled to the same formula at the original factory site in Angers:

**Carré Cointreau** (☎02 41 31 50 50; [www.cointreau.com](http://www.cointreau.com); 2 bd des Bretonnières; adult/concession €6/5.40, tasting €3; ☹by reservation) offers guided tours, which include a visit to the distillery and entry to the Cointreau archive. It is off the ring road east of Angers. From the train station, take bus 7.

By contrast, **absinthe** has had a more chequered history. Brewed from a heady concoction of natural herbs, true absinthe includes three crucial components: green anise, fennel and the foliage of *Artemisia absinthium* (wormwood, used as a remedy since the time of the ancient Egyptians). Legend has it that modern-day absinthe was created by a French doctor (wonderfully called Dr Pierre Ordinaire) in the late 1790s, before being acquired by a father-and-son team who established the first major absinthe factory, Maison Pernod-Fils, in 1805.

The drink's popularity exploded in the 19th century, when it was discovered by bohemian poets and painters (as well as French troops, who were given the drink as an antimalarial drug). Seriously potent, absinthe's traditional green colour and supposedly psychoactive effects led to its popular nickname of 'the green fairy'; everyone from Rimbaud to Vincent van Gogh sang its praises. Ernest Hemingway invented his own absinthe cocktail: ominously dubbed 'Death in the Afternoon'.

But the drink's reputation was ultimately its own downfall: fearing widespread psychic degeneration, governments around the globe banned it in the early 20th century (France in 1915). In the 1990s a group of dedicated *absintheurs* reverse-engineered the liqueur, chemically analysing century-old bottles that had escaped the ban. Try it at Distillerie Combiér in Saumur.

## Around Angers

South of Angers, the River Maine joins the Loire for the final leg of its journey to the Atlantic. The river banks immediately west of this confluence remain the source of some of the valley's most notable wines, including Savennières and Coteaux du Layon.

### CHÂTEAU DE SERRANT

Built from cream-and-fawn tufa stone and topped by bell-shaped, slate-topped towers, the grand **Château de Serrant** (☎02 41 39 13 01; [www.chateau-serrant.net](http://www.chateau-serrant.net); adult/child €9.50/6; ☉tours 9.45am-5.15pm Jun-mid-Sep, 1.30-5.15pm Wed-Sat, 9.45am-noon & 1.30-5.15pm Sun mid-Mar-May & mid-Sep-mid-Nov) is a wonderful slice of Renaissance style, reminiscent of Cheverny but on a more modest scale. Begun by the aristocrat Charles

de Brie in the 16th century, the château is notable for its 12,000-tome **library**, huge kitchens and an extravagant domed bedroom known as the **Chambre Empire**, designed to host an overnight stay by the Emperor Napoléon (who actually only hung around for about two hours).

The château is near St-Georges-sur-Loire, 15km southwest of Angers on the N23. Anjou bus 18 travels from Angers (€4.10, 40 minutes, two daily, one on Sunday).

### CHÂTEAU DE BRISSAC

The tallest castle in France, the **Château de Brissac** (☎02 41 91 22 21; [www.chateau-brissac.fr](http://www.chateau-brissac.fr); adult/child incl tour €9/4.50, gardens only €4.50/free; ☉10.15am-12.15pm & 2-6pm Wed-Mon) is 15km south of Angers in Brissac-Quincé. Spread over seven storeys and 204 rooms, this chocolate-box mansion was built

by the Duke of Brissac in 1502, and is one of the most luxuriously furnished in the valley, with a riot of posh furniture, ornate tapestries, twinkling chandeliers and luxurious bedrooms – even a private theatre. Around the house, 8 sq km of grounds are filled with cedar trees, 19th-century stables and a vineyard, boasting three AOC vintages. Open 10am to 6pm daily in July and August.

Four of the château's bedrooms are offered as ridiculously extravagant **chambres d'hôte** (d incl breakfast €390; ☎), perfect if you've always dreamt of sleeping on an antique four-poster under priceless tapestries and ancestral portraits.

Anjou bus 9 links Angers with Brissac-Quincé (€1.60, 25 minutes, six daily Monday to Saturday).